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# Gender in the Neo-liberal Research Economy: An Enervating and Exclusionary Entanglement?

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## Abstract

In this article, I discuss the gendered implications of the neo-liberal research economy. I explore the complexities and contradictions of neo-liberal discourse and how it has become entangled with higher education in general, and with the research economy in particular. Drawing on critical literature, questionnaires and discussion data from women at diverse academic career stages gathered in British Council seminars in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Dubai, I argue that neo-liberalism has been installed via material, discursive and affective means. This includes funding and employment regimes and the stimulation of a range of emotions including fear, shame, competitiveness and pride. A focus will be on how academic research is aligned with the political economy of neo-liberalism. In the context of unbundling and the *uberisation* of higher education, research is now a major vehicle for performance management and a product or service valued for its commercial, market and financial benefits. When this is added to the ongoing misrecognition and underrepresentation of women as research leaders, there are dangers of a highly gendered and exclusionary research economy. I conclude that neo-liberalism is not essentially male, but that it has reinforced male dominance of the research economy by valuing and rewarding the areas and activities in which certain men have traditionally succeeded.

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## Keywords

Gender, Neo-liberalism, Research Economy, Feminist Knowledge, Global Academy

## 1 **Nebulous, Normative Neo-liberalism: The Uberisation and Unbundling of Academic Life**

Neo-liberal is a ubiquitous and polyvalent ideology in the knowledge economy of the global academy today. The conceptual apparatus and reason of neo-liberalism have been applied to and have transformed higher education policies, practices and priorities in diverse geopolitical regions. The political economy of neo-liberalism is associated with rolling back the state and rolling out financialisation, marketisation, globalisation, privatisation, deregulation, inhumanity, austerity, injury, disposability and philistinism, i. e. the dominant value of academic work is economic, rather than intellectual (Brown 2015; Collini 2012). It can be not only a catchphrase, empty signifier or framing device, but also a potent condensate to express frustration at the rapidly changing value base of higher education in general, and of research in particular.

The neo-liberal transformation of higher education has been both discursive and material, shaping what it is possible to do, say and be, and is linked to funding and employment regimes. It has both ontological and epistemological consequences, constructing academic identities, priorities and knowledge creation itself. As a discourse, it is seen to offer both creative and oppressive potential. For some, neo-liberalism represents progress, modernisation and a type of creative destruction that purges archaic practices and date-expired people. The future of higher education is often theorised using disaster and crisis metaphors, including tsunamis (Popenici 2014) and avalanches (Barber et al. 2013). In this analysis, higher education is broken and needs to be disrupted and reformed in order to avert further crises. Disruption is often undertaken through neo-liberal practices such as audit, privatisation and its related unbundling that is the fragmentation of components of higher education that are then outsourced to other, often private providers (Macfarlane 2011). The unbundling is also applied to audit and the identification of areas of academic life that can be subjected to metrification and review, e. g. publications, citations, research grants, doctoral completions and more recently research impact (Colley 2014). Accountability and metrification are seen as welcome interventions to discipline what was often perceived as a formerly unruly profession that traditionally had too much independence and autonomy. Measurement, or management by numbers, represents a concretisation of academic labour and productivity that counters the immaterialisation and abstraction of academic life. Metrics impose the *law of value* through which the labour of higher education workers is quantified and compared, managed and disciplined (De Angelis and Harvie 2009). However, metrics can also be reductive and simplistic, or an ideology posing as a technology (Lynch 2014; Ozga 2008). They also imply norms. Butler (2006) observed that the multiplicity and

continual changes in academic norms require us to ask which norms are evoked in judging any piece of work, and how they are interpreted.

Neo-liberalism has had a profound impact on academic identities and promotes particular forms of subjectivities and citizenship. In the neo-liberal knowledge economy, academic labourers are no longer employees resourced by their institutions, but are now autonomous entrepreneurs responsible for their own investment decisions and income generation for their organisations. Neo-liberalism is both fixed and fluid, producing winners and losers. As Lemke (2001) argues, neo-liberal society is characterised by the fact that it cultivates and optimises differences. Neo-liberalism is also performed through a disarticulation of structural inequalities. It is about individual enterprise, agency and endeavour. Cognitive capitalism means that there are rich rewards for those academics who are servile to the demands of the market, including lucrative leadership positions, large research grants, performance pay increases and gatekeeper power in decision-making fora. There are severe penalties for those who fail to meet the performance indicators. For example, accounts of the suicide of Professor Stefan Grimm, who worked at Imperial College, University of London, UK, reveal how he was about to be dismissed for failing to meet financialised research targets, despite several grant applications (Morley 2015; Parr 2014). It would be erroneous to suggest that it is a question of a simple binary with winners and losers positioned in direct relationship to their acceptance or rejection of neo-liberal values. The nebulousness, fluidity, capriciousness and contradictory nature of neo-liberalism means that in the course of one professional lifetime, it is possible to both win and lose. Winning can be temporary as the clock keeps being reset (Gill 2010). In the research economy, one's dominant academic value is the size of the latest grant. Furthermore, the emphasis on relentless competitive individualism and entrepreneurship means that the collective often loses out. Harvey (2007) contends that neo-liberalism is a project that sets out to restore class dominance to sectors that saw their fortunes threatened by the ascent of social democratic endeavours in the aftermath of the Second World War. This process, he argues, has entailed the dismantling of institutions and narratives that promoted more egalitarian distributive measures in the preceding era. Competitiveness in higher education is central, with the reconstruction of students, employers and the state as consumers of an expensive higher education product and its outputs.

Universities are being driven to act as for-profit businesses in order to compensate for the withdrawal of public funding by neo-liberal governments. The term *uberisation* (Goldberg 2016; Hall 2016) has crept into the lexicon, suggesting that any service can be flexibly provided at any time by a series of micro-entrepreneurs (who often lack employment rights), and is digitally mediated. This capitalism masquerading as democratisation relies heavily on customer satisfaction surveys and

evaluative data to unbundle or customise the ‘service’ and promote the product in increasingly competitive markets. It could be argued that this precarity has always been part of the research economy, with its reliance on adjuncts who lack job security. Research projects have traditionally drawn on the uberised labour of (often female) doctoral and post-doctoral scholars (Reay 2000). This short-term strategy of contractualised and disposable academic labour and a popularist approach to students and research funders as customers contrasts with longer-term aims of developing critical citizenship and knowledge and bringing social justice issues, including gender equity, into intellectual projects and organisational cultures.

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## 2 Resisting Resistance and Investing (in) Oneself

Deconstructions of neo-liberalism and denunciatory analyses have become a central occupation of counter-hegemonic scholars (Connell 2013; Ferguson 2009; Holmwood 2014; Lazzarato 2009; Lynch 2014; Radice 2013). Critical engagements are as diverse as the concept itself, and are often saturated in affect. I receive a range of responses whenever I speak about neo-liberalism at academic conferences and seminars. A conundrum is why, if critical knowledge is the *raison d’être* of the global academy, do academics comply so readily with procedures that often work against them, and represent the interests of dominant groups, i.e. the same groups that are dismantling, privatising and uberising the academy? A common *cri de coeur* is: why has the academic profession failed to resist (Leathwood and Read 2013)? This is often followed by questions about whether opportunities for resistance are differentially distributed in an increasingly asymmetricised, casualised or uberised profession. For example, do academics at the bottom of organisational hierarchies such as early-career researchers, part-time researchers, ethnic minorities or the many non-promoted women academics have the capital to create alternative structures (Angervall 2016)? Another response is that we just need to get on with it, perform and stop mourning a fictitious golden age. A further familiar engagement is that it is a local, rather than global phenomenon, and that it exists mainly in the UK, Australia and the USA, but not in socially progressive economies such as the Nordic countries, an argument disputed by studies of neo-liberalism that suggest that it has “swept across the world like a vast tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment” (Harvey 2007, p. 23). Peck and Tickell (2007) argue that the temporal and spatial edges are always blurred, i.e. it is not always clear when and where neo-liberalism has developed, or how it has travelled or transferred. While the tidal wave, or stealth revolution (Brown 2015), has resulted in a fairly uneven taking up

of its rationalities and practices, neo-liberalism is a subject of critical analysis in diverse geopolitical regions, including East Asia (Lin 2009; Mok and Lo 2014; Ong 2006), New Zealand (Roberts and Peters 2008; Shore 2010), Britain, Chile, Mexico and France (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002), Australia (Weller and O'Neill 2014), Latin America (Sader 2008), Sweden (Edenheim and Rönnblom 2012) and in wider Europe, including Germany (Marazzi 2010). It is both a constituent of globalisation and is conveyed via global vectors.

One form of academic resistance, it seems, is the desire to interrogate the concept. The term 'neo-liberalism' appeared in nearly 1,000 academic articles annually between 2002 and 2005, and was "used to characterize an excessively broad variety of phenomena" (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, p. 137). It is frequently a synonym for capitalism and assaults on the poor and vulnerable, or a "straw man of anti-statism" (Plehwe and Mills 2012, no pagination). It has both rhetorical and analytical power. The term, however, is invariably pejorative and used mainly by its critics, rather than its advocates (Newman 2013). Boas and Gans-Morse (2009, p. 140) suggest that "virtually no one self-identifies as a neoliberal, even though scholars frequently associate others – politicians, economic advisors and even fellow academics – with this term." Stiglitz (2008, no pagination) describes neo-liberalism as a "grab-bag of ideas" based on the fundamentalist notion that markets are self-correcting, allocate resources efficiently and serve the public interest well. For many, it has become a form of abuse, with explanatory power to signify all that is wrong with the political economy of higher education, and indeed the broader context of global economics. Weller and O'Neill (2014, p. 110) argue that:

"The word neoliberalism gets power too from simultaneously pulling on a theoretical framework to apprehend the world, while talking directly about the materialisms allegedly produced by that framework."

For the purpose of this article, I wish to offer the definition that it is a type of market fundamentalism and an ideology that seeks radical changes in the relationship between state and society. Davies (2013, p. 37) suggests that neo-liberalism might be defined as "the elevation of market-based principles and techniques of evaluation to the level of state-endorsed norms." Neo-liberalism involves society being regulated by the market, rather than vice versa. Scholars suggest that neo-liberalism means that social relations and individual behaviours are deciphered using economic criteria and within economic terms of their intelligibility, thus eliding any difference between the economy and the social. Brown (2015, p. 9) has fastidiously examined neo-liberalism in her latest book on the topic. She argues that it has become "a

normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality.”

Market principles frame every sphere and activity and *Homo Oeconomicus* is foundational to the rationality of neo-liberalism, she claims:

“All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized.” (Brown 2015, p. 10)

In this analysis, academic labour in general and research in particular are valued in terms of possibilities for income generation and wealth creation, e.g. innovation and enterprise.

Thomas Lemke (2001, p. 203) also believes that neo-liberalism is a political rationality that tries to render the social domain economic and to link a reduction in (welfare) state services to the call for “personal responsibility” and “self-care”. The economic matrix, argues Lemke (2001), is also programmatic in that it enables a critical evaluation of governmental practices by means of market concepts. In the neo-liberal approach the market is no longer the principle of self-delimitation by the government, but instead the principle against which it rubs, or as Foucault (1979 quoted in Lemke 2001, p. 198) puts it, “a kind of permanent economic tribunal”. Why does this matter? It attacks democracy, as Brown (2015, p. 9) suggests: “Neoliberalism assaults the principles, practices, cultures, subjects and institutions of democracy understood as rule by the people.” Neo-liberalism achieves this by privileging the individual over the collective, or *demos*.

Investment is key to the understanding of neo-liberalism. The neo-liberal subject constantly calculates and adds value to her/himself. The financialisation agenda produces subjects who are managers of their own portfolios seeking investment and maximising their value. The discourses of networking, employability and higher education as a private, positional good, i.e. concerned with individual economic investment rather than socially responsible, critical citizenship are all about attracting investors and making oneself more marketable. As Brown (2015, p. 22) suggests, individuals need to see different aspects of their lives in terms of investments in themselves for which they are entirely responsible:

“Both persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm, both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and both persons and states do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors.”

In this analysis, the good citizen is the effective market competitor. Competition requires comparators such as scores, grades and indicators of worth. Everything requires an exchange value, and nothing is worth doing if it cannot be quantified and rewarded in the context of key performance indicators. In other words, all academic labour, activity and productivity need to be made intelligible via dominant metrics and norms. The neo-liberal aim is to transform society itself into a mode of enterprise, of entrepreneurial and productive activities, of creative and competitive subjects. Work is valued as economic conduct, with an economic calculation of endless self-enhancement (Winnubst 2012, p. 92).

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### 3 Entangling Neo-liberalism with Higher Education

Neo-liberalism has travelled from global economic governance to global education governance, resulting in a technical rationalist approach to knowledge (Patrick 2013). Higher education has been placed within a system of accounts (McGettigan 2013). It has been “hollowed out”, lacking an ethical or social function (Cribb and Gewirtz 2013, p. 339). Everything, as Roger Brown (2013) argues, is for sale, and the market can provide anything. In the UK, this has justified the introduction of high tuition fees (currently up to £9,250) on the basis that graduates will get a good personal return on their educational investments when they cash them in in the labour market. It is also now possible to buy rather than meritocratically gain entry to universities, as the world is filling up with for-profit diploma mills (Morley 2014a) that make no claims for developing critical or socially responsible citizens. It is also possible to commission and buy academic assignments, essays and even doctoral dissertations online in the rapidly developing phenomenon of contract cheating (Lancaster and Clarke 2012). Students are being reclassified as consumers or commodified subjects, who must be kept happy, satisfied and positive about their university experiences in order to evaluate their institutions with high scores. In the UK, teaching quality is being submitted to market metrics. The *Higher Education Act* (2017) in the UK introduced the *Teaching Excellence Framework* in September 2017 (BIS 2016) which converts students’ positive evaluations of their teaching into the possibility of their universities demanding even higher tuition fees. Preoccupation with the happiness of students is in marked contrast to the intense unhappiness of the academic labour force – many of whom feel overregulated, subjected to mindless surveillance and bureaucracy, and held to account via reductive and infantilising performance indicators (Collini 2003; Gill 2010; Warner 2015). Will Davies (2014, no pagination) suggests that neo-liberalism

thrives on governing through unhappiness, or “heating up the floor to see who can keep hopping the longest”. This enervating virility culture and the construction of academic identities via metrics and management by numbers (Ozga 2008) results in an assemblage of discursive, symbolic and material rewards for those servile to the priorities of the market. On the other hand, the *losers* are subjected to precarity, short-term or zero hours, and sometimes teaching-only contracts, with limited opportunities for tenure or promotion (Butler 2013). Competitive measuring is the essence of the global prestige economy (Blackmore 2015). If individuals are unable to contribute to their institution’s high scores, they are seen as having no right to employment security. Paradoxically, they cannot contribute to high scores while their labour is so precarious, e.g. research time is often absent from the contracts of casual academic labourers who are paid an hourly rate for their teaching or employed on short-term contracts.

One of the most invidious effects of the neo-liberalisation of the global academy has been that research has been submitted to market metrics (Roberts and Peters 2008). It is now more about quantifiable outputs than pursuing an intellectual project. Monbiot (2009, no pagination) observes that universities “are being turned into corporate research departments. No longer may they pursue knowledge for its own sake: the highest ambition to which they must aspire is finding better ways to make money.”

The financialisation of research has become a truth about its quality. Research is now conceptualised as income-generation, commercialisation, utility, knowledge mobilisation and impact, i.e. demonstrating that research funding results in economic and policy benefits, and performance management. It is not about criticality, scholarly independence or the production of counter-hegemonic knowledge. The political economy of research is part of the shifting values of academic life.

**Table 1** The Values Shift in Higher Education

From	To
Scholarship	Entrepreneurship
Intellectual	Income Generation
Knowledge Creation	Knowledge Mobilisation
Policy Analysis	Policy Compliance
Criticality/Citizenship	Employability

I developed Table 1 to attempt to map out some of the values that are embedded in the new vocabularies of higher education today, and how the endless repetitions of



the new lexicon install new identities and priorities – all offering new possibilities for competition and self-promotion.

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## **4 Resisting Resistance: Stepford Colleagues**

Explanations for the academic profession's failure to resist include consideration of the potent affective economy entangled in neo-liberalism. As Ball (2015) argued, it captures both money and minds. Neo-liberalism's incitement to become an entrepreneur of the self is registered and lived out emotionally (Winnubst 2012). Shame, fear, pride, guilt, desire and joy are crucial to the ways in which neo-liberalism becomes internalised and reproduced. By monetarising desires it makes us desire what is monetarised, e.g. large research grants and high institutional rankings in the global league tables. The interiority of neo-liberal discourse is enabled via performative repetition (Butler 1990), and the TINA (There Is No Alternative) effect (Marcuse 1964), and relentless naturalisation, or common sense, taken-for-granted understandings (Harvey 2007). The hegemonic hold of neo-liberalism involves a form of common sense that revolves around the naturalness of the market. This closing of the political universe and the erasure of intelligible, legitimate alternatives to economic rationality means that to oppose is to self-isolate, or even self-destruct (Morley 2015).

A further explanation for neo-liberalism's hegemonic grip on the academy relates to how it has been introduced, i.e. by stealth, rather than by revolution, often via audit regimes and funding mechanisms (Morley 2003; Brenneis et al. 2005). Brown (2015, p. 35–36) argues that it is generally more “termite-like than lion like”. It is a form of capillary power in so far as it is everywhere and nowhere, evocative of Foucault's (1991) theory of governmentality, suggesting that we regulate ourselves. The economic rationalism infusing neo-liberal educational policy tends to act upon individuals through the use of specific discourses aimed at governing the self (Patrick 2013). The neo-liberal subject and actor is not only autonomous and self-managing, but also obeys commands, e.g. how much and where to publish. The competition involved in neo-liberal employment and funding regimes has also transformed forms of resistance as it has eroded solidarity, or any sense of the collective. Resisting takes one out of the game, leaving the path clear for voracious competitors. Playing the game is central to survival for individuals, organisations and nation states (Colley 2014). Resistance has also been curtailed through temporalities and the increasing demands on academic time. The accelerated academy means that time pressures reduce deliberation about political circumstances and priorities. Carrigan (2015,

no pagination) has developed this idea in his use of the term “cognitive triage”. We attend to what is immediate, to the relentless bureaucratic demands and accountability, to deadlines, performance indicators, needs of students, funders, colleagues and line managers, and delay reflection on longer-term considerations. There is a powerful ethos of sacrifice and austerity (Gill 2010). To complain suggests vulnerability and that one is not up to the challenges of cognitive capitalism in the modern entrepreneurial university. Critique can merely serve to produce more competition and opportunities for academic boasting. For example, often when I attempt to name the quotidian neo-liberal processes in my profession, I am met with a chorus of robotic voices performing the discourse and positioning me as the ‘other’. Neo-liberalism intersects nicely with ageism, and counter-interventions are easily disqualified by positioning critics as date-expired. ‘Stepford’<sup>1</sup> colleagues wishing to ascend the hierarchy or gain reputational and material advantage in the research economy will do and say whatever it takes to succeed. Often, neo-liberal regimes are all that they have known. In her high-profile resignation from academia, Marina Warner compared UK higher education with Chinese communist corporatism, “where enforcers rush to carry out the latest orders from their chiefs in an ecstasy of obedience to ideological principles which they do not seem to have examined, let alone discussed with the people they order to follow them, whom they cashier when they won’t knuckle under” (Brown 2014, no pagination).

Warner was inundated with responses to her resignation from around the globe. In 2015, she summarised some of the injuries that colleagues reported in their correspondence:

“Others wrote to say that once they had contributed significantly to the REF [*Research Excellence Framework*]<sup>2</sup>, their posts were terminated: their usefulness was over. Some had obtained large grants, and found themselves pushed out when the funding ended. Some have agreed to contracts that require them to obtain x amount of grant money if they are to keep their jobs or look forward to any kind of promotion. Some had

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- 1 This term is borrowed from the fictional suburb of Stepford, Connecticut, in Ira Levin’s 1972 novel *The Stepford Wives*, later made into movies (in 1975 and 2004). In the story, men in this seemingly ideal town have replaced their wives with attractive robotic dolls devoid of emotion or thought. The term ‘Stepford Wife’ is used to describe a servile, compliant, submissive wife who happily does her husband’s bidding and serves his every whim dutifully.
  - 2 The REF is the successor to the *Research Assessment Exercise*. It assesses the research of British higher education institutions via disciplinary panels of peer reviewers. It focuses and grades publications, research culture and research impact. It was used in 2014 to assess UK research during 2008–2013, and is currently under review for 2021 at the time of this writing (spring 2017).

been told to change their research topic to something that lay outside their expertise entirely.” (Warner 2015, p. 8, author’s emphasis)

Exit can be forced or sometimes chosen, as a form of resistance. A body of “quit lit” is emerging (Flaherty 2015, no pagination). These are testimonies from academics who have decided to leave the academy and who have applied their critical skills to an analysis of the neo-liberal employment and research regimes that they could no longer tolerate or could not tolerate them. These affect-laden narratives have been compared with the end of the relationship rancour – full of the vocabulary of disappointment, loss and resentment. Many academics experience a passionate attachment to their disciplines and to their professions, and feel impeded, contaminated and frustrated by the shifting values. The quit lit accounts suggest that neo-liberal reforms can be experienced as intolerable amounts of surveillance and performance management, creating increasingly toxic and unhealthy workplace cultures (Thornton 2014).

The circulation of affect in the neo-liberal academy enables and produces self-governing subjects and actors. Recently, when speaking in Germany of how neo-liberalism had become entangled with gender in the global research economy, I was accused by a young woman academic of depressing her. She wanted positive ways forward, without the incremental critique of the concept. Deconstruction of dominant discourses is often perceived as destruction, leaving participants feeling that they lack hope or aspirational frameworks. It is not a happiness formula (Ahmed 2010), as criticality sets one against the juggernaut of the status quo (Danvers 2015). This response, I believe, illustrates part of the problem. Neo-liberalism has become so naturalised and has so harnessed desires and aspirations to the needs of the economy, that to challenge it can sometimes leave people without direction. Neo-liberal practices and values in higher education demand a silencing of critical engagements, and a performance of positivity. The imperative is to (rapidly) comply, not reflect. Equally, critique of neo-liberalism is so much a part of counter-hegemonic scholarship that there is rarely the space to imagine or posit alternatives (Ferguson 2009). Bozalek et al. (2013) have argued that we need a theory of critical hope. That is, we need to stay connected to our critical faculties, while not collapsing into despair. We need to keep working towards an inclusive and gender-just society, despite the barrage of neo-liberal diversions.

## 5 What Does Neo-liberalism Have to Do with Gender?

Gender intersects with neo-liberalism in multiple ways (Scharff 2014). Feminist research has suggested that women, and in particular young women, have been constructed as ideal neo-liberal subjects in so far as they are reported as aspirational and capacious. McRobbie (2009, p. 15) suggests that young women have become “privileged subjects of social change”. Some young women, especially from privileged socio-economic communities, have hungrily engaged with new opportunities, including access to higher education and the labour market and control over reproduction. Other critics suggest that feminism itself has been co-opted, appropriated and incorporated into the neo-liberal project (Rottenberg 2014). The imperative to ‘lean in’ (Sandberg 2013), suggests that gender equity is about individual cognitive and behavioural restructuring and agency, rather than socially structured change. However, there have been some perverse consequences of neo-liberalism’s intersections with feminism. For example, some feminist journals have high citation indexes (a key indicator of value in the research economy). Women are enrolling in higher education in most regions of the world (with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa and North Asia) in greater numbers than their male counterparts, prompting a global panic about the feminisation of higher education and women as the advantaged sex (Gill et al. 2017; Hillman and Robinson 2016; Leathwood and Read 2009; Morley 2011). However, there is still a global gender pay gap (Currie 2012), an absence of women in senior leadership positions (Morley 2014b; Morley and Crossouard 2016a, 2016b), and the depressing continuation of widespread misogyny and violence against women – even in the academy itself (Phipps and Young 2015).

Neo-liberal feminist subjectivity involves becoming an entrepreneurial actor rather than a social activist. Rottenberg (2014, p. 422) argues that neo-liberal feminism is replacing liberal feminism by creating a new feminist subject who is fully responsible for her professional success, well-being and work/life balance, “oriented towards optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation”. The emphasis on individual investment is predicated on the erasure or dismissal of the issues that concern the overwhelming majority of women globally, e.g. violence, poverty, health, housing and employment rights. Including more women in existing structures and systems has long been the liberal feminist success criterion for gender equity, e.g. in professions, institutions and leadership positions and including them in political opportunities. Neo-liberal feminism takes this a step further by celebrating and promoting the individuals themselves. Feminism is often co-opted or cited by individually successful women such as celebrities and entrepreneurs, to promote their achievements. This type of girl power is rarely linked

to any political analysis of patriarchy and injustice. Rather, it cites asymmetrical gender differences to justify the need for enhanced opportunities for certain women to advance. Any female success is coded up as a feminist intervention and is used as an indicator of progress, political superiority and market distinction. It is also highly essentialised, implying that the insertion of any woman, regardless of her values, is a victory for feminism. The convergence of contemporary feminism with neo-liberal capitalism favours recognition of economic achievement rather than recognition of social identity or redistribution of resources (Fraser 2013). Fraser (in Leonard and Fraser 2016, no pagination) suggests that neo-liberal feminism simplifies, truncates and reinterprets feminism in market-friendly terms, e.g. we think of women's subordination in terms of discrimination that prevents talented women from rising to the top. This version of feminism, argues Fraser, "provides an emancipatory veneer for neo-liberal predation". The emphasis is on women changing or advancing themselves, rather than changing or advancing society, and women's advancement relates to alignment with the values of the market.

Neo-liberalism tends to represent the interests of the dominant groups in most societies. The global elite has traditionally controlled the research economy, deciding who and what is fundable, publishable and promotable. Resources flow into elite institutions, thus reinforcing their hegemonic gatekeeping roles. The gendered monopoly of the research economy is a major cause for concern, with epistemological hierarchies frequently reflecting social hierarchies (Rees 2011; Wickramasinghe 2009). Markets, in neo-liberal theory, are said to disrupt monopolies and producer interests (Holmwood 2014), but this does not appear to have happened in relation to women and research. While gender has gained some research policy attention, for example in the European Union (European Commission 2008, 2011), researchers have repeatedly questioned and exposed how women's capital, particularly feminist capital, has little value (Code 1991; Morley 2015; Walby 2011). Most women, it seems, suffer a credibility deficit in the research economy.

It is pertinent to ask what happens when the neo-liberal apparatus meets women's research capital. An immediate response is that the capital is rendered unintelligible, inaudible and invisible. Accountability, that beloved concept of the neo-liberal project, does not seem to apply to gender equity. Globally, men have the edge as researchers by an enormous ratio of 71 men to 29 per cent women (UNESCO 2012). Currently, approximately four out of five professors in Europe and nine of 10 of the heads of European universities are men (Husu 2014). The prestigious European Research Council, which is endowed with €13.1 billion between 2014 and 2020, offers grants for different career stages. In 2007–2013, men's success rate for the starting grant level was 30 per cent and women's 25 per cent; for advanced grants, 15 per cent for men and 13 per cent for women (Husu 2014). Husu (2014)

reported that the knowledge-intensive Nordic countries, with globally some of the most progressive gender equality policy frameworks, had only 12 per cent female leaders in their research centres of excellence in 2011. In the UK, only two of the seven research councils reported an equal proportion of female applicants and academics (Else 2015). The European Science Foundation report *Research Careers in Europe – Landscape and Horizons* also noted:

“Although the number of women entering universities and achieving academic degrees has exceeded the number of men in many European countries during recent years, there is still a significant gender gap as far as career advancement and the higher level of the research career ladder are concerned.” (European Science Foundation 2009, p. 7)

Research authority does not stick to women, it seems. Feminist scholarship has explored how women have been traditionally cast as unreliable knowers (Code 1991). Walkerdine’s (1998) early work emphasised how femaleness is invariably positioned on the devalued side of the archaic Cartesian binary. Women’s lack of authority as knowers could also account for the catalogue of absences and exclusions from the research-based prestige economy. Women are less likely to be journal editors or cited in top-rated academic journals (Tight 2008; Wilson 2012); women are also less likely to be principal investigators and are underrepresented on research boards and peer review structures that allocate funding (European Commission 2008, 2011). They are also awarded fewer research prizes (Nikiforova 2011), and are less likely to be keynote speakers at prestigious academic conferences (Schroeder et al. 2013). Without wishing to homogenise or essentialise women by suggesting that increasing their participation results in more gender-sensitive processes and practices, or espouse a neo-liberalism feminism that claims that the presence of any woman, whatever her values, is a victory for gender equality, it could be argued that there is a circular relationship between the exclusion of certain groups from prestigious relay points in the knowledge economy and the reproduction of the norms that define the field. For example, women’s research authority is often insufficiently recognised to allow them to be peer reviewers and gatekeepers in influential positions, and peer reviewers continue to misrecognise women’s research. A classical study of the peer review system of the Swedish Medical Research Council revealed that female applicants for postdoctoral fellowships had to be 2.5 times more productive than their male colleagues to get the same peer-reviewed rating for scientific competence (Wennerås and Wold 1997). The situation is continuing today, with questions about who acts as gatekeepers of precious research resources. Husu’s (2014) research found how the excellence-marked initiatives that have been established across Europe have been more beneficial for male than female researchers and that female researchers are losing out in excellence funding even in the systems that

are formally in favour of gender equality. She reports an “unspoken antagonism between gender equality, as defined in funding bodies’ policy aspirations, and the outcomes of their decisions on what they defined as excellence. In short, excellence, at least as it is currently operationalised, is creating new gendered stratifications in our research landscapes.” (Husu 2014, p. 2)

Exclusions raise questions about who is defining the field of social research, who are the standard makers, and what are the performance indicators. A related question is whether the exclusion of certain social groups, ideologies and methodologies produces epistemic exclusions, normative reproduction and intellectual closures in a global knowledge economy.

To address some of the above challenges, the British Council organised seminars in 2012–2013 in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Dubai under the title *Absent Talent: Women in Research and Academic Leadership* (Morley 2013, 2014b, 2015). The seminars brought together women at diverse career stages to discuss women’s participation in higher education leadership and research (Forestier 2013). Participants from South and East Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, Australasia and Europe were invited to share experiences and knowledge of gender-related issues in higher education, including enablers and obstacles to women’s progression as leaders. In advance of the seminars, 40 questionnaires were circulated to academic women working in Australia, China, Egypt, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Turkey, and 20 were returned. The sample was constructed to include current and previous vice chancellors, deputy vice chancellors, deans, research directors, and mid- and early-career academic women located in social sciences, humanities and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines. They were asked for their views on what enables and supports women, what interventions exist to encourage women, their personal experiences of being enabled or impeded from entering research and leadership positions, and what makes leadership attractive/unattractive to women. Panel and group discussions and presentations were recorded, transcribed, analysed and coded in order to capture formal and informal narratives about how gendered power is relayed in the global academy, and to identify key themes, patterns and discontinuities across the national boundaries.

In Hong Kong, the panel included six senior women academics from Australia, China, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Thailand. In Japan, the panel comprised three senior academic women from Japan, Thailand and the UK. Additionally, in Tokyo, four papers were presented from the Philippines and Malaysia and two from Japan. In Dubai, the seminar preceded the 2013 *Going Global* conference and provided the opportunity for papers to be presented from Egypt, Hong Kong, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine and Turkey. There were

22 seminar participants in Hong Kong, 25 participants in Tokyo and 25 in Dubai. From this relatively small sample, policy, statistical and often visceral knowledge was shared and co-created.

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## 6 The Gendered Global Research Economy

Some of the key themes narrated by the women in my study included terms that are often used in discussion of the neo-liberal academy: precarity, unbelonging, gendered unbundling and exclusion. These were compounded by gendered readings of power and privilege, including lack of authority, the affective economy, gendered career pathways and networks, and the overwhelming lack of sponsorship for them at crucial stages in their careers (Morley 2015). The terms are associated both with the political economy of neo-liberalism and the competitive global research economy. However, the gendering of both domains, and their interaction with inequality regimes, reveals the subtle and damaging ways in which research merit is gendered, evaluated in market terms and associated with particular embodiments (Davies et al. 2005). A common observation made by women in this research was that research authority does not stick to women, and that differential values are culturally assigned to women and men. Additionally, informal relays of power in the form of gendered networks, opportunity structures and norms disrupt the logic of meritocratic progression. Women reported how gendered networks suggest that some people are rendered invisible and inaudible in the neo-liberalised knowledge economy. A common complaint related to attribution and that women's underrepresentation in powerful positions in the research economy was attributed to their lack of talent, competitiveness, commitment, agency, or their caring responsibilities and perceived career interruptions, rather than to structural social and institutional discrimination. Their frequent observations about how they were excluded from research opportunities and diverted more to precarious or teaching-only contracts and low-level, high-volume bureaucracy suggest that research capacity is not a neutral entity that already exists to be talent spotted, but is co-created by contingency, context and opportunity structures. It is the gaze of the observer, loaded with sociocultural meanings and power relations that identifies who is to be developed as a potential research leader (Morley 2015).

My research suggested that the neo-liberalised optic or evaluative gaze that was used to identify research leadership potential was not seeing many women. Differential value was accrued and attributed to different types of knowledge workers in the neo-liberal economy. Women reported how they either were not on or had not



been encouraged to get on to research career pathways, including membership on key decision-making research committees, journal editorial boards and teams for large-scale projects. If they were not located in appropriate research spaces, this meant that they were less likely to develop research capacity. A barrier that was reported by all respondents was the interplay between horizontal and vertical segregation and the gendered division of labour, with many women (and some men) invariably tasked with inward-facing domestic labour. This positioning materialised academic identities that were not conducive to success in the global research economy, producing yet another circularity. As ‘failed’ academic capitalists, they were less likely to get promotion or tenure (Coate and Howson 2014). Women described how the unbundling of academic services meant that they were often deployed in less prestigious areas of academic life. This positioning interacted with a lack of opportunities to apply for research grants and produced research-inactive academic identities. The failure in grant capture in today’s financialised global academy means that they are more likely to be deployed in less prestigious areas of academic life, and so the gendered unbundling continues. Their academic identities were constructed as losers. This was discussed by Winnubst (2012, p. 86):

“Consequently, as the neoliberal ontology of human capital takes root through this social rationality of enterprise, questions of identity slide into the question of success.”

The academic ‘winners’ in the sample, such as women vice-chancellors, deans and directors of research centres, frequently reported how they had had to work excessively to achieve their positions, invariably with no structured support, mentoring or professional development. In other words, they had succeeded as enterprising individuals. Some, however, came from socially and/or economically privileged backgrounds, or academic dynasties that had provided them with important opportunity structures and social capital. This did not mean that their leadership was problem-free, as many narrated quotidian encounters with gendered relays of power that stripped them of their authority and often left them feeling undermined and devalued (Morley and Crossouard 2016a). Women also discussed how the concept of merit, as defined in higher education, operates to reinforce male advantage by rewarding those characteristics that men do well, i. e. having a single-minded focus on research and publication over an extended period of time to the exclusion of other responsibilities such as care work and diverse career experiences, and with important sponsorship and developmental opportunities. Women often found that their academic capital was misrecognised and marginalised in financially driven research markets. If certain social groups are persistently and structurally

excluded via precarity and hierarchy, this represents a form of distributive and epistemic injustice.

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## 7 Summing Up

Neo-liberalism is not an external, material entity or seamless monolithic apparatus that is easily identified and resisted. Neither is it nonhuman or essentially male. It is not just about injury or subjectification. However, it is a policy and affective installation that has been absorbed into academic identities. The obsession with competitive individualism, income generation and profit means that it can be highly beneficial for those who comply with the market-driven and metricised performance indicators. As Coate and Howson (2014) argue, prestige comprises the accumulation of esteem indicators. If women are being discriminated against by not gaining power and prestige in the research economy, this places them in a weaker position in the hierarchy of winners and losers in the global academy, e.g. they are less likely to be leaders (Morley 2014b; Morley and Crossouard 2016a, 2016b), will earn less (Currie 2012), and will be more likely to be part of the uberised and unbundled academic precariat (Butler 2013), that is, on short-term and part-time or zero hours contracts. While not all academic women are injured personally, and some are most definitely neo-liberal winners, neo-liberal values damage women as a group, in so far as they reinforce individual investment and gains, rather than collective struggles to overcome social injustices and exclusions. Knowledge production, custody and dissemination processes purport to be neutral and objective, but overlap with social and policy hierarchies. The issue is not just about employment opportunities for relatively privileged academic women, but also about knowledge itself. Narratives of social justice and inclusion have been dismantled in favour of economic growth. Inequality, it seems, is essential to stimulating market competition.

A question that remains is what is to become of counter-hegemonic knowledge in general, and feminist knowledge in particular, in a research ecology based on monetarised values. A further question for critics of the neo-liberal political economy of higher education is what is desired, rather than what is contested. How can feminists produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently (Lather 2013)? One challenge is that feminism is frequently perceived in the global research economy as date-expired, or as an opportunity for commercial enterprise, e.g. expensive courses to empower women to become leaders. A further issue is the extent to which the value base of neo-liberalism has been internalised by researchers themselves. McNay (2009) talks about the economisation of subjec-

tivity. Neo-liberalised entrepreneurial subjects relate to themselves as if they were a business (Scharff 2016). It is questionable whether complex and nuanced feminist explorations have a market value in societies that want quick fixes and quantitative change, e.g. more women on boards. It is important not to reify feminism but to see it as dynamic and open to transition and transformation. However, can gender be kept on the agenda in a way that does not incorporate, colonise, re-purpose, neutralise or co-opt it into the tedious taxonomy of performance indicators that silence rather than enliven debates on the university of the future? A range of options have been identified at various seminars and conferences that have discussed these topics, including crowdfunding of feminist scholarship, the creation of more feminist space in learned societies and more accountability measures for funders. A *Manifesto for Change* was co-constructed at the British Council seminars in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Dubai (Forestier 2013). In a cultural context of post-feminism that individualises failure, this intervention attempted to identify structural, rather than personal impediments to women's research achievements. Desires for change were directed to opportunity structures in the socio-political sphere rather than turned inwards to the entrepreneurial self.

### **Manifesto for Change:**

#### **Accountability, Transparency, Development and Data**

- Equality as Quality – Equality should be made a key performance indicator in quality audits, with data to be returned on the percentage and location of women professors and leaders, the percentage and location of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and gender pay equality. Gender equity achievements should be included in international recognition and reputation for universities in league tables.
- Research Grants – Funders should monitor the percentage of applications and awards made to women and to actively promote more women as principal investigators. The application procedures should be reviewed to incorporate a more inclusive and diverse philosophy of achievement.
- Journals – Editorial boards, and the appointment of editors, need more transparent selection processes, and policies on gender equality, e.g. to keep the gender balance in contributions under review.
- Data – A global database on women and leadership in higher education should be established.
- Development – More investment needs to be made in mentorship and leadership development programmes for women, and gender needs to be included in existing leadership development programmes.

- Mainstreaming – Work cultures should be reviewed to ensure that diversity is mainstreamed into all organisational practices and procedures.

A task is to ensure that the above change interventions are not neutralised or co-opted into the neo-liberal project by institutions taking them up in order to strengthen their market position, e. g. diversity as a commercial enterprise. Nor should they be unbundled and executed on separate trajectories from core academic leadership.

Neo-liberalism is not essentially male, but it has reinforced asymmetrical power relations and the male dominance of the research economy by valuing and rewarding the areas and activities in which certain men traditionally succeed. It has restored the gender order that was beginning to be challenged by feminist academic work. The existence of neo-liberal feminism is a warning that it would be erroneous to construct all women as feminists or committed to the collective good. However, with research priorities increasingly determined outside of epistemic communities and the utilitarian rationality that links research to economic growth rather than social responsibility, it is imperative that feminists keep troubling and disturbing the common-sense norms and rationalities of the neo-liberal research economy. It is a policy assemblage, and as such can be dismantled.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the British Council for enabling and facilitating the empirical research, the 72 women participants in this study, and Heike Kahlert for inviting and editing this article.

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Kahlert, H. (Ed.)

2018, VI, 289 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-19852-7