Dilemmas of an Academic Feminist as Manager in the Neoliberal Academy: Negotiating Institutional Authority, Oppositional Knowledge and Change

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Abstract
While still rare, women are achieving important leadership roles as managers inside universities. This article explores the practical and theoretical dilemmas posed for academic feminists who enter such positions in the age of the ‘neoliberal academy’. These are familiar dilemmas for feminist bureaucrats – femocrats – working inside political, governmental, judicial and economic institutions but have been less explored with respect to the academy. What can academic feminists do when they take on middle or senior management roles? How do they experience being simultaneously the embodiment of institutional authority (to manage, regulate, quantify, monetise) as managers, as well as a source of oppositional knowledge as feminists? To what extent are there opportunities to work with the grain of an institution to challenge the gendered status quo from within? Or are academic feminists who manage inevitably co-opted and compromised? The article takes an autoethnographic approach to reflect upon the author’s experience as a ‘tempered radical’ in third tier management (as an executive dean and head of school) in a public research-intensive UK university, and to offer lessons about the radical potential of insider strategies of change.

Keywords
academic feminist managers, feminist change, women in the profession, tempered radicals

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Introduction
This article explores the practical and theoretical dilemmas posed for academic feminists who enter management positions in the age of the ‘neoliberal academy’. It takes as its starting point the question posed by scholars such as Gill (2009) who asks: ‘what would
it mean to turn our lens upon our own labour processes, organisational governance and conditions of production?’ In line with the growing academic trend to give voice to personal experience to generate social and political insights, I take an auto-ethnographic approach (Ellis et al., 2011; Ettore, 2016), reflecting upon my experience as an executive dean and head of large school of social sciences in a public research-intensive UK university.

In doing so, I seek to contribute to debates about the radical potential of ‘insider’ reform strategies for those engaged in the ‘specific, deliberate, and often exhausting institutional change work’ in the academy (Cole and Hassel, 2017: xvii) as well as share lessons with early career feminist scholars, peers, and those who may be on the cusp of taking on similar positions.

My approach to management is informed by my work as a feminist political scientist studying gender reform efforts particularly during periods of restructuring and institutional change, and the efforts of ‘tempered radicals’ or femocrats: feminist bureaucrats, legislators and jurists who work within existing structures to challenge the gendered status quo despite the perils of co-option and complicity (Chappell and Mackay, 2020).

Tempered radicals, according to Meyerson and Scully (1995), are individuals who are committed both to their organisations and to a cause, identity or ideology that is at odds with the dominant institutional culture. Their radicalism drives them to challenge the status quo (as does their very presence as individuals who do not ‘fit’). Their temperedness reflects the way they have been toughened by their sense of struggle and ambivalence, and angered by the ‘incongruities between their own values and beliefs about social justice and the values and beliefs they see enacted in their organizations’ (Meyerson and Scully, 1995: 587). Importantly, they are tempered in their inclination to practice moderation in their interactions with power-holders, and in their efforts to effect change: ‘In this sense, tempered radicals must be simultaneously hot- and cool-headed. The heat fuels action and change; the coolness shapes the action and change in into legitimate and viable forms’ (Meyerson and Scully, 1995: 587). The emphasis is on insider strategies of seeking incremental change through ‘small wins’ (after Weick, 1979, 1992) and by ‘authentic actions’.

While the concept of tempered radical has travelled to varied institutional and organisational settings, its origins rest in the experiences of Debra Meyerson and Maureen Scully and their own struggles as academic feminists and humanists in a university business school. It has informed my own practice as an institutional actor and has provided me with insights to make sense of my experience (see, also, O’Connor’s, 2014, account). The approach resonates also with the recent turning away from the ‘strong co-optation thesis’ of dominant feminist critiques (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2018) that ‘deny the possibilities of political agency by folding the achievements of feminism into accounts of neo liberalisation’, assuming feminists who pursue institutional change by means of gender equality policies and programmes such as gender quotas and gender mainstreaming are ‘seduced or deluded’ (Newman, 2013). Such totalising critiques certainly capture the problems and shortcomings of insider and institutionalist strategies but appear to foreclose the possibility of resistance or reform (for a nuanced review, see Eschle and Maiguashca, 2018).

The questions that animate my reflections are as follows: How do academic feminists experience being simultaneously the embodiment of institutional authority (to manage, regulate, quantify, monetise and audit) as managers, as well as a source of oppositional knowledge as feminists? What are the opportunities and constraints within these
management roles to exercise feminist leadership and to effect change, particularly in an environment where academic managers are increasingly pressured to adopt private sector values and practices in forms of ‘new managerialism’? What are the compromises or ambivalences required to work from the inside as a ‘tempered radical’ in the neoliberal university? While my central focus is on academic feminists as institutional change agents, the issues raised are pertinent to other critical scholars, and to the daily dilemmas and ‘multiple politics’ of resistance (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017: 9) for all those marginalised by the gendered and racialised culture of the academy.

The article progresses in three parts. An autoethnographic approach connects anecdotal and personal experience to wider cultural and political phenomena (Adams et al., 2010). In Part 1, I set out the various contexts within which my experience as an academic feminist manager is situated. First, I address the wider literature on the progress of women in higher education (HE) including women in management. I next clarify the distinction between management and leadership before arguing that feminist leadership may be exercised through academic management positions as a type of insider strategy. My experience as a manager is positioned within the wider debates about the promise and pitfalls of feminist insider strategies in institutions including universities. Finally, the dilemmas of academic feminists sit within their wider institutional context, that of the neoliberal academy and specifically the HE sector in the UK.

In Part 2, I set out my personal context by providing biographical details, information about the nature of my management role, and my motivations for taking on the position. Through four short vignettes, I explore the dilemmas of an academic feminist as manager in the neoliberal academy, negotiating institutional authority, oppositional knowledge and change.

In Part 3, I reflect upon my experiences seeking to connect them to wider themes in the literature and conclude that despite the undeniable struggles and mixed outcomes, taking on academic-management positions has to be one of the feminist strategies to bring about structural and cultural change.

Part 1: Contexts

Women in HE

Women have made uneven progress in HE: while they now outnumber men as students and academics in most universities in the global North, academia remains stubbornly gendered as masculine as well as patterned by horizontal and vertical segregation and ongoing legacies of coloniality (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017). Cultural, economic and social barriers remain, which marginalise women and racialised minorities, and privilege majority men (Atkins and Vicars, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2018; Bhopal and Henderson, 2019) across all the major academic disciplines. Intersectionality data are patchy, which arguably tell us something about the importance ascribed to it, but evidence suggests that for women and men from non-traditional backgrounds, women and men of colour, and particularly women of colour these barriers are particularly challenging. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women currently comprise less than 2% of the UK Professoriat (Runnymede Trust, 2017).²

Women are also achieving important management roles inside universities in both the global North and global South, however, a significant gender imbalance remains, particularly at executive management level (Shepherd, 2017), across different countries and
diverse policy landscapes in terms of gender equality legislation and policies (Morley, 2014). In 2020, only 39 of the top 200 universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings was run by a female,3 and in the UK women are around 20% of Vice Chancellors. Moreover, complacency among senior decision-makers has been reported, with issues of equality and diversity ‘barely registered as a concern’ in a survey of university governors (Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, 2015: 15).

A growing body of literature examines women in academic management including issues of supply and demand, and their complex interconnection. The motivations, ambition (or lack thereof) and experiences of women in the ‘pipeline’, typically those in second tier (such as Pro-Vice and Deputy Vice Chancellors) and third tier (such as Deans and Executive Heads of School positions), have been studied (Chesterman et al., 2005; Fitzgerald, 2014; Morley, 2014; Shepherd, 2017). These studies have revealed a range of structural and cultural inequalities faced, including lack of mobility; the discriminatory effects of homosocial networks and ‘leaderist’ values (Bagilhole and White, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2014; Morley, 2013; Shepherd, 2017); the gendered division of labour inside and out with the academy (Acker, 2012; Bagilhole and White, 2011; Deem et al., 2000); and processes of ‘gender devaluation’ experienced by women despite their senior roles (Monroe et al., 2008). While formal gender equality and diversity policies and initiatives have proliferated, including those that seek to rectify the over representation of white men in decision-making positions, the implementation gap remains glaringly large. Despite the espoused ‘mainstreaming’ of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) by universities, and sustained feminist activism on campus, informal institutions in the form of patriarchal culture, discriminatory practices and exclusionary norms persist (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019; Currie et al., 2002; Savigny, 2014; van den Brink et al., 2010).

Against these backdrops, studies have revealed the considerable practical, physical and emotional costs faced by women who manage in academia, including detrimental impacts on creativity and sense of identity (Acker, 2012; Alvesson et al., 2008; Drake, 2015; Morley, 2013, 2014). Their ‘collective stories’ describe universities as ‘hostile places’ in which women are required to ‘manage negative emotions such as fear, stress, hurt and alienation’(Cole and Hassel, 2017; Fitzgerald, 2014: 105). Emergent female leaders/managers are encouraged to take on responsibilities at an earlier stage than their male counterparts (Pflaeger-Young et al., 2020) but receive mixed messages: on the one hand, they are encouraged to undertake more and more work; but are also expected to keep a low profile about their labour, and its significance, lest they be accused of being disruptive or uncollegial (Cole and Hassel, 2017: xii). The literature suggests there are considerable personal and professional dilemmas for female academics in terms of seeking, or exercising, positions of authority and power in universities where, despite formal inclusion, multiple and systemic barriers remain. However, there are also opportunities for agency, ambition and the pleasure of achieving results that improve the lives of students and colleagues alike. Some women thrive in University management positions, often to their own surprise (O’Connor, 2014, 2019a; Shepherd, 2017).

My central concern is with a sub-set of female academic managers. Few studies focus directly on feminists as manager academics, and fewer still provide first person accounts (but see Acker, 2012; Drake, 2015; O’Connor, 2014; O’Connor, 2019a). This may reflect a reluctance among academic feminists to research management as a field of practice or to seek management roles in their institutions (Deem and Ozga, 2000; O’Connor, 2014). Nonetheless, some studies suggest feminist academic managers do appear to have the potential to transform their institutions in feminist-inspired ways using their
outsider status to act as change agents, ‘moving beyond both gendered traditional forms of collegiality and new managerialist approaches to the academic labour process’ (Deem and Ozga, 2000: 154; see also O’Connor, 2014, 2019a) albeit within significant constraints. According to the literature, the resources provided by FWGS scholarship and practice enable feminist academic managers to develop critical analyses of trends in HE, for example, towards quality assessment and management, performance-based cultures and measurement (Deem and Ozga, 2000: 158; see also Swan, 2010 on gendered and racialised dimensions of audit) as well as a range of strategies of resistance and change (Deem and Ozga, 2000: 160; O’Connor, 2019b). Others caution that the belief that academic feminists can lead differently in the contemporary managerialised global academy can be a form of ‘cruel optimism’ (Morley, 2013: 120 after Berlant, 2011).

**Context: Management or Leadership?**

Before progressing further, it is worth trying to clarify the difference between management and leadership as the terms are often used interchangeably. Typically, management is understood as a formal position in an organisation with routine responsibilities for processes required to achieve organisational goals. The emphasis is on managing complexity, achieving stability and getting things done. Relationships are hierarchical, transactional and based on authority (see review in Grint, 2011; Lunenburg, 2011). According to the literature, leadership, in contrast, goes beyond the routine and is regarded as a multi-directional relation of influence. Leaders focus on motivating, understanding and inspiring others (as colleagues rather than subordinates). The emphasis is often on envisioning new approaches and on organisational transformation (Kotter, 1987, 1990). While in theory there are distinct differences (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2011), in practice there is considerable overlap.

In this article, I am concerned about formal management positions: roles which come with institutional heft and authority. These positions come with responsibility for people and money, and have multiple accountabilities. Importantly, they have formal decision-making power. In the HE sector in the UK, all academic-management positions require the exercise of leadership to one degree or another, but not all academic leadership is exercised through formal management positions. Much institutional work, especially that seeking cultural or organisational change, relies on leading through influence and the gaining of commitment and ‘buy-in’ from colleagues and more senior manager-leaders.

While I am sceptical there is a distinct set of rules comprising a ‘feminist’ style of management, feminist academic practice consists of a ‘disposition’ (Ackerly and True, 2010) including attentiveness to unequal power relations and social justice, to relationships, to boundaries of inclusion and exclusions and forms of marginalisation, and to self-reflection. At a minimum then, a feminist style of management would attempt to steer clear of control, domination and competitiveness. It would be open to one’s own vulnerabilities and limitations, would seek to use positional power to open up opportunities for other people, and endeavour to build shared capacity. It is apparent that there is considerable overlap between feminist management and the markers of feminist leadership (Batliwala, 2010; Cole and Hassel, 2017) in seeking to hold and exercise power ‘helpfully’.4

Over and above issues of equal opportunities and individual career aspirations, of the empowering effect of role models and of the potential to disrupt gendered norms through the presence of women in powerful positions, the focus on academic feminists in management is important because (as in other aspects of their practice) they are committed to
progressive social change beyond individual remedies (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017: 4). Academic-management positions offer the opportunity then, within constraints, to exercise feminist leadership and are an important form of insider strategy.

**Context: The Contested Terrain of Feminist Insider Strategies**

A long-standing debate within feminism is the extent to which there are opportunities to work with the grain of an institution to challenge the gendered status quo as ‘outsiders within’ (Collins, 1986; Hawkesworth, 2006) or ‘tempered radicals’ (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) without ending up co-opted and compromised. Drawing on feminist social science, these are familiar dilemmas particularly for feminist bureaucrats – or ‘femocrats’ – working inside bureaucracies such as governments, legislatures, international and regional organisations, and religious and military institutions (Caglar et al., 2013; Chappell, 2002; Eisenstein, 1991; Eyben and Turquet, 2013; Katzenstein, 1998; Sawer, 1990). These actors sit in an ambivalent and often uncomfortable position. While acknowledging these are spaces of constraint and entanglement with neoliberalism, these accounts highlight the dilemmas and the opportunities for feminist agency and strategy in capitalising on ambiguities, ‘soft spots’ and internal contradictions in ways that open new possibilities and pathways, and achieve small wins that may, over the long haul, ‘add up’ to more fundamental shifts (see, for example, Chappell, 2016; Chappell and Mackay, 2020; Dersnah, 2016; Katzenstein, 1998).

These insider actor-centred discussions are part of wider scholarly debates examining and problematising the promise and pitfalls of gender equality interventions in varied institutional and organisational fields (Benschop et al., 2012; de Vries and van den Brink, 2016), including strategies such as gender or equalities mainstreaming, gender quotas and state feminism (for overviews see Franceschet et al., 2012; McBride and Mazur, 2013; Squires, 2007; Walby, 2011). As de Vries and van den Brink (2016) note, it has been difficult to translate theories of gendered organisational change into effective strategic interventions that build more gender equitable organisations, and relatively little attention has been paid to date to complex questions of operationalisation and implementation (though see Cavaghan, 2017; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019).

There is disagreement between different feminist perspectives as to the extent to which insider strategies such as gender mainstreaming should be seen as appropriated by neoliberalism in ways that have ‘bureaucratised and depoliticised’ the radical intentions of feminism (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017: 6–7), although most recognise the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism needs to be interrogated. Neoliberalism is a vague and highly contested term but is widely understood to relate to logics that the universalise market social relations and valorise individualisation and self interest (Newman, 2013; see later discussion). Feminists argue the theory and practice of neoliberalism is deeply gendered, from the construction of the neoliberal unencumbered and rational subject, the privatisation of care, to the differential outcomes and injurious consequences of neoliberal policies (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017). While market logics do not always operate against the interests of women, the practice of neoliberalism draws upon and reinforces existing structural relationships of power and selectively re-inscribes patriarchal social norms (Cornwall et al., 2008).

Critics argue that the rise of policies and ‘technologies’ of mainstreaming equality and diversity, shaped by feminist activism and ideas, is ‘synonymous with the advent of new managerialism and the rhetoric of good governance’ (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017: 6–7).
This has coincided with the rise of new forms of ‘moderate’ (Roy, 2013 cited by Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019) or ‘market’ (Squires and Kantola, 2012) feminism concerned with a minimalist agenda of individual empowerment within existing structures.

These dilemmas have also been explored but to a lesser extent with respect to the HE sector as an important site of institutional power and knowledge production undergoing rapid change. Much of the work to date has addressed gendered and intersectional inequalities in the academy – as a workplace, a professional field, a set of organisations, an arena of knowledge production or some combination of the above. There are three overlapping approaches. The first seeks to identify and expose gendered/intersectional barriers and biases, to quantify, and to track trends over time (see, for example, Bagilhole and White, 2011). The second examines the implementation of insider strategies such as gender or equality mainstreaming (of policies; of curricula) and gender equality audits including accounts by academic feminists engaged in this work in their own institutions (Ahmed, 2012; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019; Verge et al., 2018). The third takes a more bottom-up approach and focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and groups of academics at different career stages (Ahmed, 2017; Acker and Wagner, 2017; Pereira, 2017; Thwaites and Pressland, 2017). While the former literature challenges institutions and disciplines to address discrimination and proposes institutional solutions, much of the latter literature focuses on everyday academic life and presumes an outsider status/positioning. It tends to be sceptical of the potential for meaningful change to be achieved in the academy through insider strategies and institutional tools that can so often be reduced to the performative ‘doing’ of equality or diversity work (Ahmed, 2012) and the reinforcement of, for example, white privilege (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019; Bhopal, 2018). Focusing on micro-politics, empirically explored locally, prescriptions for action tend to be individualised micro-resistances and efforts at making ‘small but significant’ changes in academic institutions (Parsons and Priola, 2013).

I note a pivot away from overly pessimistic critique about the totalising effects of neoliberalism on feminist efforts to intervene in social and political institutions, including HE, towards increasingly pragmatic and strategic approaches. Scholars from across different feminist perspectives, including those involved in gender equality programmes or other feminist activism in their own universities, are increasingly advocating more contextualised approaches that start from the premise of the need to engage with existing structures, to accept the contradictions inherent in being both ‘in and against’ neoliberalism (Newman, 2013) and that ‘moderate’ tools can be used to pursue radical ends (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019), accepting change is likely to be incremental (Cole and Hassel, 2017).

Such approaches envisage a more dynamic understanding of the interaction between feminisms and neoliberalism where each ‘flexes’ in response to the other (Newman, 2013). In such a conception, agency is possible through, for example, the strategic reframing of managerial notions such as quality to mean equality and inclusion, and by the ‘bending of new logics’ to embed equality into ‘neoliberal technologies’ such as audit, performance management and metrics (Newman, 2013; see also Breitenbach et al., 2002; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). According to Tzanakou and Pearce (2019), the framework of ‘moderate feminism’ – akin to tempered radicalism – should be understood as pragmatic practice rather than commitment to neo-liberal ideology. Such an approach can lead to benefits and achievements, albeit constrained, in terms of institutional and cultural change and institutional initiatives. Drawing upon their study of the Athena Swan charter pioneered in the UK (a form of equality accreditation), they argue that feminists may ‘use
“moderate” practices to create a space to organize, engage and develop a collective solidarity, utilizing the HE sector’s recognition of these practices to exert pressure and ensure commitment from senior management for developing actions and programmes with transformative potential’ (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019: 1193).

**Context: Situating the Dilemmas of Academic Feminists Who Manage**

‘Feminist academics find themselves “doing managing” in particular sets of cultural, social and economic conditions’ (Deem and Ozga, 2000: 157). The HE sector in the UK comprises of around 220 universities and tertiary level institutions and has undergone considerable change over the last three decades in response to domestic political and policy drivers and wider global trends (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017). In 2018–2019, there were 2.38 million students studying at UK HE institutions, of which 57% were female, 76% white and around 340,000 international. Of the 439,955 staff (excluding atypical staff) employed at UK HE institutions, around a half were academics. According to the latest figures, of academic staff with known ethnicity, 83% are white. Some 42% of full-time academic staff and 63% of non-academic staff are female. Women and BAME men are more likely than white men to be working part-time, at lower grades, or on fixed term contracts. In 2019, universities reported a gender pay5 of 15.1% (Pells, 2019). Only 27% of professors in the UK are women (HESA, 2020).

The sector is highly varied in terms of size, degree of coverage or specialism, profile of student population and geographic location. Institutions are typically characterised as either pre 92s or post 92s. The pre-92 sector comprises traditional universities most of which are research intensive. These include self-selected elite groupings such as the Russell Group. As of 2017, Russell Group member institutions received over three-quarters of all university research grant and contract income, and awarded two-thirds of all doctorates in the UK. Their students dominate graduate-level employment, and many member institutions score highly in global ranking systems. The post-92 sector comprises new institutions or former teaching-intensive polytechnics and central institutions that were granted university status under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Since 1998, universities in the UK have charged tuition fees as public funding has been squeezed and, as elsewhere, there has been a pivot away from conceptions of the traditional mission and ethos of the university as a public good to more instrumental understandings of HE as ‘an industry for enhancing national competitiveness and as a lucrative service that can be sold in the global market place’ (Naidoo, 2003: 250). In 2017–2018, almost half of university income was derived from student tuition fees (including 13% from overseas students who are typically charged premium fees) compared with around one-quarter from all government grants (Universities UK). Still largely a public system, the government has, through the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) 2017, removed barriers to enable more private providers to enter the sector.

Global processes of neoliberalism have changed the relationship between HE, the state and the market. Neoliberalism is understood to be the universalisation of market-based social relations. These trends include internationalisation, marketisation and corporatisation which have seen the increased commodification of education and research (Barnett, 2011; O’Connor, 2014, 2019b), the intensification of work and erosion of academic autonomy, and the transformation of students into ‘consumers’ (Lipton and MacKinlay, 2017). New managerialism reflects these neoliberal influences and is characterised as the adoption of corporate values and practices from the private sector to the
public sector, where it has increasingly displaced traditional academic leadership (Deem and Ozga, 2000; Lynch et al., 2009; White et al., 2011). This includes the growth of ‘audit culture’ (Power, 1994), metrics and performance management regimes through which governments seek to regulate public services including universities (Swan, 2010). ‘Whatever form it takes, it “gnaws away” at “the power, status and role of academics in university governance and management”’ (Deem et al., 2008). Taken together these trends represent the rise of ‘The Neo Liberal University’ (Giroux, 2001). HE in the UK is seen to have embraced neoliberal reforms early (O’Connor, 2014; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2018) and is understood by some as a laboratory of sorts for neoliberal innovations within the HE sector, with new approaches frequently adopted subsequently elsewhere in Europe and beyond (Pereira, 2017; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019).

While the premise of the neoliberal university is now well-established, some important caveats are required. Monolithic versions of this thesis neglect diversity and variability. I argue that instead it is more fruitful to envisage a neo-liberalising rather than a fully formed neoliberal institutional field. On the ground, we experience variability and differentiation which are differences that matter; indeed, not all trends associated with neoliberalism and managerialism need be inherently unprogressive (including professionalisation, accreditation, accountability and quality assurance). Many of these trends – particularly those that have increased transparency – have been helpful in easing the entry of marginalised groups and knowledges into the academy (Deem, 1998) or making visible the low-profile service work typically undertaken by women (for discussion, see O’Connor, 2014: 39). It is also the case that important continuities can be discerned, some progressive, some exclusionary, paternalistic and colonialist, and yet others with mixed effects (Gill, 2009). Indeed, many of the aspects that make the university a site of inequality and a ‘Greedy Institution’ (Coser, 1974; Franzway, 2001: see also Currie et al., 2002) predate or exist in parallel with neoliberal developments and are rooted in gendered ideologies and the sexual division of labour.

How these trends play out on the ground, and the role of agency in resisting, adapting and subverting, are matters for empirical research. They set the context for the challenges, dilemmas and opportunities of being an academic feminist leader-manager in the neoliberal university.

Part 2: Situating This Academic Feminist Manager

Brief Bio

I am a feminist political scientist working in the fields of political representation, governance, and institutional and policy change. I am also something of an accidental academic having had a ten year career as a journalist (including managing a news desk) before going to University. After my undergraduate studies, I decided to pursue a PhD not least in part because, at the time, academia seemed to hold more promise than the media world of the 1990s for combining work with bringing up a small child as a single parent. After a couple of temporary positions, I got my first permanent lectureship in 1998 (at the age of 39). I have spent a considerable part of my academic career juggling leader-management positions with teaching and research. This trajectory is somewhat to my own surprise (although I had enjoyed management/production roles in my previous television career). I was appointed in 2014 as Dean and Head of a large School of Social and Political Science at a ‘Russell Group’ University and served four years. I had previously served as Director of its large graduate school of science (2009-12) and as Deputy Director before
that (2003-07). I currently direct my University’s interdisciplinary hub for gender and sexualities studies.

**What Is the Role?**

According to the induction I received, the role of Head of School occupies a central position in the leadership structure of the University. The role of the Head of School is to:

- provide academic leadership, develop appropriate plans and ensure delivery of School objectives, in particular, for teaching and research which are aligned with and develop in line with overall University and College strategies.
- be responsible for the management of the School and all of its people and financial resources.
- oversee compliance with legal, financial, health and safety, and equality and diversity regulations and reporting requirements.
- play a key role in the leadership and the development of the University encouraging collaborative working between Schools and departments across the University and acting as an ambassador for the School, College and University with external stakeholders.

As noted above, Heads of School (known as Deans externally) in the context within which I work formally wield considerable power (akin to Executive Deans in other structures). They are responsible for people, budgets, and resources and have important strategic and planning powers. The university operates with a high degree of decentralisation in comparison with many other institutions in the sector. This accords a Head of School substantial discretion within overall policy and planning parameters and key performance indicators.9

The university norm at present is that senior academics take on these roles after making an application and undergoing an interview with the Head of College (Pro VC), another Head of School or Dean, and academics representing their school, informed by soundings taken with colleagues. Successful candidates are formally appointed for a limited term of office (typically 3 years, with the option of extension by 2 years by mutual agreement) before returning to ‘normal’ professorial duties. This adaptation of the rotational model of management can be seen as a vestige of older forms of faculty or collegial governance and communal decision making (O’Connor, 2014) and remains commonplace in pre-92 universities although, as a norm it is eroding, with a trend towards the recruitment of external permanent (or longer term) appointments at tier-three level (Deans, Executive Deans and Heads of School). Permanent appointments to academic administrative positions are standard in post-92 universities, as part of earlier processes of corporatisation.

**Why Did I Take on the Role?** Why do academic feminists take on managerial positions (see Schaefer Hinck et al., 2017)? For myself, the short answer is, because I was asked. The longer and messier answer is comprised of multiple reasons. These relate to my attachment, despite its flaws, to the institution in which I have spent my academic working life, my shared feminist commitment to structural and cultural change, and the personal and professional affirmation that the position represented. I cared about and felt responsible for the school and my colleagues, and I felt loyalty towards the institution.
As a feminist who had spent decades arguing for equality and the need to challenge ‘male, pale and stale’ power hierarchies, I thought I needed to ‘walk the walk’. I also thought it might help make women in leadership a new normal, including the potential role model effect of having a feminist lesbian, adult returner and one-time single parent at the helm of a large school of social sciences.

If I am honest, it was also affirming to have my leadership legitimacy endorsed and my competence presumed by both status quo power elites and colleagues. Indeed, I have sometimes wondered whether it is a particularly tempting form of neoliberal ‘seduction’, about which Hester Eisenstein (2010) cautions, for academic feminists to be offered positions of institutional power in the neoliberal academy. Such positions bring apparent prestige and power – tantalising opportunities to gain capital in the ‘prestige economy’ (Morley, 2013) of HE and in marked contrast to the marginal position of academic feminists and the precarious status of their scholarship (Cole and Hassel, 2017; Pereira, 2017).

Finally, I took on the role, despite doubts and concerns about it taking me away from research and teaching, and my academic friendship circles, because it was a powerful executive position and I thought I might be able to make a feminist difference at practical, normative and organisational levels. I had made an impact on graduate researcher careers in a previous leadership role as Director of a large graduate school but had been frustrated at the constraints that come with no budgetary, line management or human resource powers. The lesson I had learned was that positional power was a means to get things done (see also, O’Connor, 2014: 131). As a tempered radical, I had realistic expectations of what could be achieved in a middle management and time-limited position but hoped I could make small but significant wins.

**Vignette 1. Everyday Feminism and Academic Management: Norms and Normalising.** Working with colleagues, I have tried to shape, nudge or affirm the development of an organisational culture that takes equality and diversity seriously. These efforts to normalise feminist values have sometimes taken the form of ‘stealth feminism’ (Laliberte et al., 2017) in that rather than explicitly flag up arguments or critique as feminist, instead I have assumed it is the normal lens for viewing the world. I have put in place measures to recognise and value different sorts of academic ‘capital’ and experience including through recruitment, reward and promotions processes (as far as school autonomy allows). There have been small wins like female colleagues promoted while on/or just returning from maternity leave; the validation of ‘well rounded’ promotion cases that recognise service and teaching; and progress towards the closing of the professorial gender pay gap through the use of benchmarking. I have sought to make visible and elevate academic good citizenship (so often practised by women but not only by women) as a form of leadership. My experience aligns to an extent with Pat O’Connor (2014: 2) who argues that her positional power as a Dean enabled her ‘to redefine the gendered characteristics required of those in positions of authority within the faculty’.

I have promoted a school culture that values methodological pluralism, interdisciplinarity, co-production of curricula, social justice and global and local connectedness: all of which flatten hierarchies and help validate the scholarship and teaching of feminist academics and other critical and engaged scholars. I have given space to, and reinforced, measured critical responses to and interpretations of various performance frameworks relating to teaching and research, informed by research on the gendered and racialised nature of knowledge making and measurement (Grummell et al., 2009; Swan, 2010), and the gendered and racialised assumptions underpinning classifications of academic excellence.
The lesson learned is the exercise of everyday feminism can result in small wins. Using my positional authority, I have thus been able to set the ‘tone’. I have not been able to address systemic structural constraints but have tried to enable a local institutional environment and narrative which chip away at cultural and institutional norms and create the space for solidarity.

**Vignette 2. Academic Feminist Manager and ‘Institutional Readiness’: Seizing the Moment.** An academic feminist as manager can utilise her positional power and leverage, institutional knowledge, and resources to seize moments of what Jane Mansbridge (2017) calls ‘institutional readiness’ to move forward feminist education and FWGS scholarship. This was the case with the development of the university’s Gender Initiative.

There had been countless conversations over the years about how best to connect feminist and gender scholarship across different schools and disciplines in a large and decentralised university; how to make research-led teaching options more visible to students; and how to identify gaps and build capacity. This has especially been the case since the scrapping of ‘with gender’ programmes by the university in the early 2000s which meant, despite the number of gender courses continuing to thrive and grow, there was no means of aggregating presence and impact (Govinda, 2020). Within my own school there had been benign neglect, despite well-evidenced cases of the need for further investment. However in 2014, by strategically aligning with campaign demands of student leaders, and ‘instrumentalising’ the case for new interdisciplinary gender studies provision (including around graduate attributes and employability), I was able to combine my experience as an academic feminist with my positional power as a Head of School to provide institutional leadership to drive forward the initiative. This was in contrast to earlier efforts that had foundered without an ‘institutional’ lead or adequate resources (the downside of decentralisation for interdisciplinary and precarious disciplinary fields). This resulted in new hires, the creation of a successful university-wide introductory interdisciplinary course on gender and sexualities and the launch of a cross-university virtual ‘hub’ connecting scholars, teachers and students10. This is an example of, or lesson in, using power helpfully by seizing a moment of institutional readiness and using institutional knowledge to make things happen.

**Vignette 3. Academic Feminist Manager as ‘The Man’: Everyday Bordering in the Academy.** I probably felt at my most conflicted over my responsibilities as an academic manager to ensure compliance with university rules around ‘migrant’ workers and students. The UK government’s increasingly hostile policy regime around immigration is well known (see, for example, Goodfellow, 2019). The trends of marketisation and internationalisation (key components of neoliberalisation) means universities are under increased scrutiny by the UK Visa and Immigration agency (UKVI) as significant employers and educators of ‘migrants’. Nira Yuval-Davis and her colleagues set out the ways in which recent immigration legislation and policy has shifted the focus from external to internal borders in what she calls ‘everyday bordering’. Through technologies of surveillance and monitoring, the government has shifted the onus of checking the immigration status of service users, tenants and employees, onto ordinary citizens, landlords, hospitals and schools, and employers including universities. As such, they have been required to become ‘border guards’ with the fear of sanctions if they fail (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). The sector has been required to adopt and demonstrably implement stringent monitoring arrangements to gain and maintain Highly Trusted Sponsorship status (HTS) for work and study visas.
As manager, I was legally responsible for ensuring compliance – and ensuring compliance in the way that the university interpreted its responsibilities which, at times, seemed somewhat cumbersome as compared with practice elsewhere in the sector. This included applying enhanced monitoring arrangements universally (to all students and all staff, whatever their visa status) on the stated grounds of equity and non-discrimination. Colleagues objected to the underlying politics of the UK immigration regime, to the requirement that they participate in ‘everyday bordering’ (e.g. through the taking of class registers) and to the rolling out of new staff whereabouts reporting to ‘non-migrants’ (as evidence of further erosion of academic freedom, and managerial over reach). Resistance took several forms, including dissent, resistance, obstruction and non-compliance.

As a Head of School, I could ensure there was space for debate and dissent, I could (and did) represent the views of colleagues to central management, to advocate for workarounds, for ‘light touch’ implementation, for school discretion. I sought to protect and deflect. Along with many Heads of School, I kept up pressure on university leaders to continue their lobbying efforts (behind the scenes, and therefore not widely known to colleagues) with the Home Office to challenge policy. Personally, I was politically opposed to the chilling effects of the immigration regime. I agreed with colleagues’ critique and condemnation of government turning universities and academics into border guards. However, ultimately, I was responsible for ensuring school compliance – and demonstrably so in the context of a looming UKVI audit that would monitor and assess the extent to which the university was fulfilling its legal requirements. And I did have to make clear I was prepared to take disciplinary action in the last resort. I was frustrated that, for some colleagues, political resistance in the abstract trumped (or at least obscured) the real and material dangers to students and staff that non-compliance might bring – that is, the loss of the university’s HTS and the summary expulsion of all visa-holders. I was also frustrated at the elasticity of the concept of academic freedom (which could cover for a multitude of other things).

It was a stressful and isolating time; I felt anxious, beleaguered and alone – estranged from otherwise like-minded colleagues. I was accused of being an agent of the neoliberal university and the racist State. In the retelling, it was clear that, in the eyes of many of my colleagues, I had become ‘The Man’ – the embodiment of institutional authority and the symbol of the establishment.

Looking back, I think a number of lessons can be drawn. The first is that as an academic manager, there are times when your discretion and creative workarounds are exhausted, that you must manage in order to meet organisational imperatives and legal responsibilities. In such circumstances, the concept of tempered radical is helpful in understanding and navigating the tensions of such dilemmas and to hold onto the ethic of ambivalence. It is also perhaps the case that, with little room for maneuver, achieving a ‘least worst’ outcome is a form of small win.

Vignette 4. Academic Feminist Manager as Gender Stereotype: ‘It Took a Woman’. I have been struck – but not surprised – at the amount of emotional labour that has been required in this management position. There have been strong expectations and therefore considerable burdens in terms of the emotional and pastoral support I have needed to provide colleagues across grades and experience. At times, I have been overwhelmed by the affective load, absorbing the effects of occupational stress, dealing with conflict, anxiety and disappointment (Acker, 2012). This was in marked contrast to expectations of my male predecessor, who was seen as dynamic and entrepreneurial, and also hands-off and externally focussed and is evidence of what Louise Chappell (2006) has called the a gendered logic of...
appropriateness at play. The literature suggests a general trend in that when women take up senior posts, their positional status and authority tends to be downplayed while the service dimension of the role they occupy is emphasised, even exaggerated, in a process of ‘gender devaluation’ (Monroe et al., 2008: 219). In a North–South conversation about dilemmas of academic feminists as managers, my counterpart, Dean Krishna Menon of Ambedkar University Delhi, noted the downgrading and subtle dismissal by colleagues of much of her daily work as ‘uncreative’ and akin to ‘housework’ (Mackay and Menon, 2020).

As is the case with other women manager academics, I have struggled to avoid being put in a ‘motherly role’ but nonetheless, when hard decisions have been taken, I have encountered reactions that I suspect are powered, at least in part, by a sense of me as a ‘bad mother’ (Deem and Ozga, 2000: 158–159; see also Eisenstein, 1991). Female managers are likely to be damned for managing ‘as a woman’ or ‘managing like a man’ (Atkins and Vicars, 2016; Wajcman, 1998). I have had to defend my preferred ‘soft’ or ‘feminised’ management style of consultation, coaching and collaboration as effective, strategic and values-based, rather than as weak or as arising from a natural ‘feminine’ disposition (Grummel et al., 2009).

There have been multiple everyday ways in which I have been brought down to size, and achievements minimised through lazy essentialism, and gender devaluing. The following anecdote provides a good example. About halfway through my Headship, I was in conversation with a senior and distinguished male professor: ‘You’re doing a great job as Head of School, Fiona.’ I thought he might be referencing some of the initiatives we had delivered, for example, investment in professional services and young academic talent, new academic programmes, teaching innovations, equality and diversity, research performance? But no, he continued: ‘The café will be your greatest achievement . . . and, of course, it took a woman’.

I led a successful project to create a café and social/study space on the ground floor of the main School building in 2015 in the face of resistance from corporate services. This was a hard-fought win, to be sure, and had eluded previous Heads of School. It required the courting of support from senior University leaders by tying the initiative to University priorities and goals. But the falling back on gender stereotypes by my distinguished colleague and his assumption that it ‘takes a woman’ serves to naturalise the association of women with the provisioning of others (of caring through catering, if you like). It reduced my strategic vision for a space of community (and good coffee) to a natural disposition as well as downplaying my overall record as a manager-leader.

My experience has made me reflect personally on legitimacy – formal and sociological – and leadership, including the extent to which femaleness, gender and feminism have affected (in paradoxical ways) my ‘authority’ in particular contexts, and the impact of gendered work power relations on my values (see Deem and Ozga, 2000: 157). I feel ambivalence: on one hand, care work is important and a valued part of my own practice. But this begs the question about how can the gendering of this sort of labour be undone, and its worth recognised as a crucial part of leadership for women and men?

**Part 3: Making Sense, Making Connections**

In using autoethnographic techniques, academics present a ‘vulnerable self’ as part of a process of sense making (Ellis et al., 2011; Ettore, 2017: 2). It requires ‘care, humility, honesty and political and ethical sensitivity’ (Ettore, 2017: 6). This includes reflecting upon intersectional privilege, in my case the relative privilege of an English-speaking, white
feminist who is a senior and established academic in an elite university. Autoethnography is an unfamiliar method for a political scientist, and I have been struck that this has been a far harder piece to write than I had anticipated. But I am aware that I have had the ‘luxury’ of experimenting with this form without the risks inherent for early career scholars (see Forber-Pratt, 2015). Turning the lens on myself, my academic community and my practice as a leader-manager is uncomfortable. I feel my feminism, my academic credentials and my effectiveness as a manager/academic leader are under the spotlight, and all may held to be wanting. Like Gill (2009), I also fear the exercise may smack of self-indulgence.

For reasons of confidentiality and sensitivity to my institution and my colleagues, I have taken a cautious approach: my vignettes have not been fleshed out with characters or much detail, and other potential vignettes have been discarded, because these stories are not (only) mine to tell (Wall, 2008). I hope that, although broad brush, the account still captures the essence of the method: ‘making good use of our experience’ (Ettore, 2017: 4) and telling ‘pointed truths’ that have the potential for creating change (Averett, 2009: 361) and envisioning ways forward (Ettore, 2017: 9).

In exploring the dilemmas of negotiating institutional authority, oppositional knowledge and change as an academic feminist leader-manager in the neoliberal academy, I have sought to contribute to debates about the radical potential of ‘insider’ reform strategies. As a long time mentor advising colleagues across career stage on how to navigate the academy, I hope my experience opens up a window for the sharing of lessons in survival and impact for early career feminist scholars, peers, and those who may be on the cusp of taking on similar positions.

The school I led is a complex organisation within a bewildering bureaucracy, and embedded in a volatile and changing environment. I have been affirmed by my line managers (the university’s most senior leaders) and my colleagues (well, most of them), as a successful and effective academic leader-manager. Managing has been both attritional and exhilarating. I have experienced complex combinations of ‘recognition and dismissal’ (Pereira, 2017). Echoing the stories of other women leaders and aspiring leaders in the global academy (Cole and Hassel, 2017; Morley, 2014), I have also experienced management as ‘loss’: loss of self, loss of important research identities and loss of some relationships.

While being clear-sighted about the constraints under which middle managers operate, my own experience has been also of opportunities to hold and exercise power helpfully. Indeed, I have relished the opportunity that positional power has given me to take decisions to make a difference (Shepherd, 2017). Like O’Connor (2014; 2019b) I have experienced management also as a position of visibility, personal authenticity and efficacy. As a tempered radical, I have been able to effect change through ‘small wins’ and ‘authentic action’.

My experience has been of tier three/middle management in a rotational/temporary post which comes with limitations with respect to both time and power. In starting out, part of the attraction of the position was the rotational model which balanced the formal corporate structures of decision making with important, now informal, norms and practices of communal decision making, turn taking and multi-directional accountabilities (to senior management and to colleagues). In hindsight, the temporary nature of power brings a number of drawbacks, especially the limitation on impacting institutional changeover the long haul, and seeing longer term projects come to fruition. Those resistant to change may simply sit out your term of office; successors may take a different tack. The juggling of formal managerial responsibilities and expectations of collegiality can be difficult and create dissonance (as was acutely the case with Vignette 3). Finally, reintegration into the
‘ranks’ after serving in such a role can bring unanticipated challenges. However, as someone who did not seek a long-term career in academic management/administration, the goal was to achieve small wins and these are inevitable limitations.

Conclusions

What do we learn about insider strategies of change and feminist leadership? All academic feminists experience the academy with ambivalence (O’Connor, 2014; Pereira, 2017). Academic feminists who manage (in generic management positions in the mainstream, rather than, say, in gender equality/change leadership roles) must grapple with additional dilemmas of simultaneously being the embodiment of institutional authority with the power and responsibility to manage, regulate, quantify, monetise and discipline – as well as a source of oppositional knowledge. It is important to understand the promise and limits of feminist ‘insider’ strategies, of working with the grain of an institution to challenge the gendered status quo from within.

Perhaps, the principal dilemma for academic feminists is whether or not to participate in an era of leaderism and managerialism, of marketisation, consumerism and audit. Should feminists aspire to take on positions of authority with top-down power dynamics and the perils of complicity in the neoliberal academy? I think the question is an important one, and the potential pitfalls serious, but it needs to be considered along with its corollary: is it better then to leave it to non-feminists to steer, shape and exert power in the academy? Is it enough to rely only on strategies of resistance or critique from the margins? University management – VCs, ProVCs, Deans and Heads of School – all do important identity work and steer the values of the academy. My stance as a tempered radical is towards a mid-position: one that accounts for the limitations, compromises and intended and unintended consequences of insider actions and strategies, at the same time as being clear about the need to engage with actual existing institutions, the significance of small shifts in context over time and the necessity of compromises at other times to achieve ‘the least worst outcomes’ (see also Chappell and Mackay, 2020).

My intervention adds to a growing trend among feminist scholars from a range of theoretical standpoints to challenge overly pessimistic accounts about the futility of engagement. Blanket labels like neoliberal academy may speak a truth at a macro-level but fail to capture the nuance and variability of these tendencies. In so doing, they miss the ‘institutional openings’, crisis tendencies, ‘soft spots’ and contradictions on the ground through which agency can be exercised and progressive change promoted.

I end with the question of where do academic feminists need to be if we seek to challenge ideologies that justify gender inequality, change prevailing patterns of control over resources and transform institutions that reinforce existing power relations? I suggest we need to be in multiple places and all levels, including in middle and senior management, seeking to hold and exercise power ‘helpfully’ to bring about structural and cultural change.

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Notes

1 By which I mean those who study, teach and research in the interdisciplinary field of Feminist, Women’s and Gender Studies (FWGS) or use a feminist gender lens in their own disciplines. As Sara Ahmed (2017) notes to live a feminist life is to be a feminist at work. However, for the purposes of this piece, I make the distinction between academic feminists (for whom professional and political identities intertwine) and academics who are feminists but whose professional identities and scholarly expertise lie elsewhere.
2 https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/BlackFemaleProfessorsMarch2017.pdf; See also, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/feb/05/talented-women-of-colour-are-blocked-why-are-there-so-few-black-female-professors
3 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/top-10-universities-led-women
4 My thanks to anonymous Reviewer 1 for this point, and for the metaphor of holding power ‘helpfully’.
5 https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/gender-pay-gap-uk-universities-report-slow-progress (last accessed 29 June 2020).
6 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/23-01-2020/sb256-higher-education-staff-statistics; https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sb256/figure-6; see also, https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he (last accessed 29 June 2020).
7 https://russellgroup.ac.uk (last accessed 29 June 2020).
8 In the devolved Scotland, tuition fees were replaced with a graduate endowment scheme (2001-2007). Since 2007 the Scottish government has covered the tuition fees of eligible students who meet the residency or other requirements.
9 Sue Shepherd’s (2017) work identifies Deputy/ Pro VCs (2nd tier) and Deans/Heads of School (3rd tier positions) as important ‘pools’ as well as influential levels of leadership in themselves.
10 See https://www.gender.ed.ac.uk
11 After considerable struggle, we succeeded in getting a café and social/study space created on the ground floor of the main school building in 2015. This is a multi-functional space to encourage community, the exchange of ideas, collegiality and the enhancement of student and staff experience. It also provides a showcase for our values of sustainability and equality and diversity.
12 My thanks to Reviewer 1 for this insight.

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