Bullying and the neoliberal university: A co-authored autoethnography

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to deepen the understanding of academic bullying as a consequence of neoliberal reforms in a university. Academics in contemporary universities have been put under pressure by the dominance of neoliberal processes, such as profit maximization, aggressive competitiveness, individualism or self-interest, generating undignifying social behaviours, including bullying practices. The presented story takes us – a junior academic and his conceptual encounterer – through our remembered experiences and field notes around a set of workday events in one European university reformed through managerial solutions as the object of the study. To do that, we employ co-authored analytic autoethnography to learn how neoliberal solutions reinforce paternalistic relationships as significant in career development, how such solutions enable the bullying of young academics and how neoliberalism in academia prevents young academics from contesting bullying. We are particularly interested in the bystander phenomenon: a person who shies away from taking action against bullying and thus strengthens bullying practices.

Keywords
Autoethnography, bullying, bystander, mobbing, neoliberalism, universities

Introduction
Contemporary laissez-faire economic liberalism and the rise of the market society have pressured universities to adopt different management-led reforms. As neoliberalism impacts academia, it does so in the familiar ‘form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms’ (Brown, 2015: 17). Accordingly, academics and universities ‘are conceived of as market actors whose objectives are to maximize their capital value, and whose values rest on enterprise and
investment’ (Rhodes, 2017: 25). As a consequence, academics learn to assess situations based on the ‘need to recognize that alliances are only profitable as long as they prove useful in promoting their career and that they have to exclude colleagues before they are themselves excluded’ (Jensen, 2010: 427–428).

Neoliberal reforms in academia increase the burden on academics to constantly prove their value and to produce instant outputs (Shore and Wright, 2015). This pressure is primarily forced upon academics through the parameterization and quantitative evaluation of academic work, such as algorithmic assessments, based on publications in top-ranked journals (Craig et al., 2014). The main aim of the latter is to gradually increase university rankings in the international context (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; Münch, 2014). Furthermore, neoliberalism gives rise to various precarious forms of employment and increased pressure from unregulated competition for resources (Strathern, 2000).

The neoliberalization of academia negatively affects the lives of scholars (Clegg, 2008; Knights and Clarke, 2014). Problems such as increased stress and chronic depression from uncertainty in tenure-track positions (Jago, 2002), workaholism due to competition in an insecure environment that demands excellence (Pheko, 2018a), loss of academic identity (Learmont and Humphreys, 2011), erosion of a teaching ethos (Szwabowski and Wężniejewska, 2017), decreased motivation, work-life imbalance, self-interest, depression and/or loss of self-esteem have been reported (Alvesson, 2013; Bothello and Roulet, 2018; Ergöl and Coşar, 2017; Kallio and Kallio, 2014; Marinetto, 2018; Tuchman, 2009; see also the separate section ‘Mental health: a university crisis’ in The Guardian, 2019).

In all, the neoliberalization of academia opens up universities to the process of adiaphorization (Bauman, 1989). Adiaphorized organizations declare that organizational practice is beyond good and evil, morally irrelevant and not open to ethical scrutiny, making it hard for academics to contest and evaluate current practices from a moral standpoint (Bauman, 1989, see Jensen, 2010, 2014, 2018 for applying the concept to organization studies). Among university actors, early-stage researchers (including PhD students) and teachers (henceforth junior academics) are particularly exposed to neoliberalization and the process of adiaphorization, as they are the most vulnerable groups of academics (Archer, 2008; Laudel and Gläser, 2008; Ylijoki and Henriksson, 2017).

Junior academics face job insecurity and must fight for autonomy and legitimacy in their academic environment (Bristow et al., 2017). They must also base their academic work on the new quasi-market principles of research excellence but are not equipped with the social and economic capital allowing them to compete in the imposed neoliberal game that values the number of publications, citations and grants (Bristow, 2012; Morrissey, 2015; Zawadzki, 2017). Furthermore, the limited availability of grants and state funding for research supports few junior academics, while teaching-administrative overload (often temporary and precarious) reduces the time available for performing research and seeking funding opportunities, thus increasing uncertainty (Bristow et al., 2019). Nonetheless, a high degree of responsibility for academic productivity rests on the shoulders of junior academics.

Neoliberalism in academia has made it difficult for junior academics to manage ownership of their careers and outputs (Robinson et al., 2017); thus, this disadvantaged group looks for support from their academic protectors, who retain the power to distribute employment, workload and funding (Malsch and Tessier, 2015; Prasad, 2013; Raineri, 2015). Junior academic identities are politicized by the reinforcement of unethical paternalism treated as a strategy to reduce uncertainty (Fleming, 2005; Knights and McCabe, 2001; Newby, 1977). Consequently, opportunism, authoritarian dependency and a lack of autonomy cause the disadvantaged to reproduce the inequalities of their workplaces. We thus also witness the pauperization of junior scholars, the ghettoization of their research and the marketization of the idea of meritocracy, such that meritocracy becomes
merely a tool for neoliberal reforms to legitimize further injustice (Magala and Zawadzki, 2017; see Littler, 2018).

Although the impact of neoliberal reforms on academic work and identity is well documented, how neoliberalism may foster unethical practices in academia, including bullying, remains unclear. This article participates in the debate on bullying in academia through an autoethnographic account of the experience of a junior academic at one European university that was intensively reformed through neoliberal management-led solutions. In the story, we are particularly interested in the bystander phenomenon (Mulder et al., 2017; Paull et al., 2012). A bystander is a person who shies away from taking action against bullying (or another unethical malpractice) and can thus act in such a way that reproduces or strengthens the bullying act by ‘looking away’ and continuing with what is considered ‘the normal state of affairs’. As Zygmunt Bauman (1989) has highlighted, the line between victim and bystander is more porous than we might believe. The main questions this article asks are as follows: (1) In what way does neoliberalization, as a local managerial strategy, enable the bullying of young academics? and (2) How does neoliberalism in academia prevent young academics from contesting bullying (e.g. reporting or confronting the bully)?

This study makes two contributions. First, it reveals how neoliberal principles put into practice at a university foster unethical behaviours, including workplace bullying. Second, it reveals the complex and disturbing experience of academic bullying, including mixed emotions, moral dilemmas and personal confusion, which often results in irrational and inconsistent behaviour and prevents individuals from taking action.

This article is structured as follows. In the first part, we describe the relevance of our study by relating it to existing research on bullying in academia. Next, we explain our methodology, placing particular emphasis on the co-authored analytic autoethnography approach. Finally, we present and analyse the autoethnographic inquiry into workplace bullying, authored by a junior academic, and what we in this article refer to as a ‘conceptual encounterer’. The story is based on the crucial social situations that arose for an employee in a European university that was intensively restructured through neoliberal reforms.

Understanding workplace bullying in academia

Workplace bullying (known as mobbing when it includes multiple bullies) refers to instances of repeated and intentional humiliating behaviour directed at the victims who find it difficult to defend themselves (Aleassa and Megdadi, 2014; McCarthy and Mayhew, 2004). It is based on psychological violence related to stigmatizing character and behaviour and typically includes the following practices: spreading rumours, social isolation, silent treatment, verbal aggression, attacking an employee’s performance, attitudes and private life, undermining one’s professional status or even physical violence (Mulder et al., 2017; Yamada, 2008).

Bullying occurs most often in work environments that promote intra-organizational rivalry, organize employees through the functional division of labour, have strong hierarchical relations and unfair structures (in terms of, for example, gender, class and ethnicity) and suffer from scarce resources (Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott, 2013). In this sense, the neoliberal university – characterized by excessive pressures of job performance (‘in search of excellence’), a masculine culture of competition, a division of labour based on control and punishment (management and administration) and achievement (academics), scarce resources and cutbacks, and pressure on workers to succeed (Branch and Murray, 2015; Hollis, 2017; Twale, 2018) – seems to be fertile ground for bullying.

Academic bullying may also appear to be morally irrelevant, that is, beyond good and evil, due to the neoliberal game of excellence, which supports unethical practices, especially when a bully
produces desirable organizational results (McCarthy and Mayhew, 2004). The academic bullying culture might even encourage aggressors’ overconfidence that their actions are moral and can continue without negative consequences or reactions (Aleassa and Megdadi, 2014). Another reason for the perceived moral irrelevance of actions and relations in academia stems from asymmetrical relations of power, which prevent junior academics from revealing inappropriate conduct (Westhues, 2004), as they depend upon both the performance system and academics in the upper echelons of the organization (i.e. current or former supervisor, professors, academic managers).

Since most literature on workplace bullying focuses on victims and/or perpetrators, the role of bystanders in bullying is unclear. This gap is problematic because bystanders are contextually present in the bullying process and sometimes even essential to a perpetrator’s ability to continue unethical actions (Omari, 2010). The circumstances and actions embedding the bullying must therefore be placed in a broader context. Isolating perpetrators, as is normally the case in both criminal and tort law (Bauman, 2002; Young, 2003), might not explain how actual horrific events unfold and are realized (Bauman, 1989).

As Twale (2018) has observed, indirect forms of bullying are typically more challenging to detect, identify and resolve than are more direct forms, but they produce the same negative consequences that direct forms do. Purposefully undermining one’s reputation by spreading rumours, gossiping or making repeatedly mock of somebody behind her or his back, are the most common forms of indirect bullying in the workplace (Eslea, 2010). As scholars have observed (Heames and Harvey, 2006; Paull et al., 2012), the role and function of both victims and bystanders are becoming blurred. We agree with Darla Twale’s (2018) observation that ‘simply concentrating only on the bully’s and/or the target’s actions fail to address the possibility of an engrained bully culture’ (p. 18). In other words, bystanders can actively affect the relationship between victims and perpetrators (Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Twemlow et al., 2004; Westmoreland, 2015). As bystanding implies choices concerning (in)action on the part of the (bystanding) individual, the role of bystanders cannot be reduced to simply witnessing or observing the bullying.

The discipline of management, when interested in unethical practices in organizations, generally assumes that a small portion of the organizational members cause havoc and unethical practice. Consequently, the taken-for-granted assumption is that human beings have good character and are generally benign. Even though humans can fail miserably in moral terms, it can be corrected (thus the substantial interest in academic research on psychological tests and ethical programmes to correct deviant action). Following Bauman (2002) and Young (2003), this might be the explanation for the failure, or the lack of interest, to bring the bystander into the equation of victims and perpetrators (Jensen, 2010, 2014). If we assume instead that humans are morally ambivalent – neither good nor evil (Bauman, 1989) – and that circumstances and contexts have a critical influence on human conduct (Browning, 1998; Milgram, 2005 [1974]; Welzer, 2005), then we realize the need for worrying ‘more about ordinary men and woman who, by acting “normally”’ (Jensen, 2014: 13) in neoliberal contexts, turn into bystanders. With this bystanding, the opportunity for the bullying perpetrator to achieve his or her goals increases considerably. The opposite is also true: a world without bystanders would have very few bullies.

**Method and approach**

**Methodology of autoethnographic research**

Autoethnography enables first-person narratives, self-observation and self-reflection on the author’s experiences, and although autoethnography has its own tradition in the field of ethnographic research (see Adams et al., 2015; Hayano, 1979; Reed-Danahay, 1997), it is a relatively
new approach to organization studies (Boyle and Parry, 2007; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012; Hermann, 2017; Parry and Boyle, 2009). In the field of organization studies, autoethnography facilitates a deeper understanding of relationships between researchers and the organizational context in which they function. Organizations are constituted by networks of meanings that exist through constant interpretations by social actors (Czarniawska, 1997). Following a narrative understanding of organizations, the personal autoethnographic narrative facilitates an understanding of the activities of organizing in which one partakes.

Hence, autoethnographies in organization studies attempt to give meaning to the organizational reality by interpreting personal experiences and communicating them to a wider audience. These experiences often carry a negative value and contain subjects such as sexual harassment (Moreira, 2007), emotional emptiness (Miller, 2002) and bullying (Sobre-Denton, 2012). Universities have increasingly become targets of autoethnographic accounts (Alvesson, 2003; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011; Petersen, 2009; Ruth et al., 2018; Tienari, 2019), and scholars write stories about academic bullying that focus on struggles and resistance against unethical actions rather than about bystanding (Pheko, 2018a, 2018b; Vickers, 2007).

Autoethnography, in general, is a form of ethnography that relies on creative narrative design and experimentation with various forms of communication to establish a meaningful relationship with the reader (Spry, 2011). It involves

setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation [. . .] and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (Jones, 2005: 765)

It is also common that autoethnographies have emancipatory ambitions, which are pursued by expressing critical feelings towards particular issues of power (Jones and Pruyn, 2018). Emancipatory, or critical, autoethnography enables the analysis of experiences that relate to a struggle with discursive forces of authority, resistance and conflict (Denzin, 2003; Spry, 2011). Hence, ideally, autoethnography helps empower the researcher and readers (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). In this sense, autoethnography exercises a policy of democratization that aims at creating spaces of dialogue and debate, which may initiate and shape social changes (Jones, 2005). This is an ambition and exercise that we strive for in this autoethnographic inquiry.

In this study, we analyse self-observational empirical material with social science theories (Anderson, 2006) and thus agree with scholars who claim that autoethnographic research should aim to develop broader theoretical issues related to the context of personal experience (Anderson et al., 2003; Winkler, 2018). As Hewoon Chang (2008) observes, ‘[I]nstead of merely describing what happened in your life, you try to explain how fragments of memories may be strung together to explain your cultural tenets and relationship with others in society’ (p. 126).

According to such an analytic strategy, Leon Anderson (2006) distinguishes several rules that legitimize an analytic autoethnographic inquiry. First, researchers should be simultaneously a participant and an observer of the context they investigate. Second, researchers should attempt to scrutinize the interaction between them, the environment and other social actors. Third, it is paramount to be visible and active in the text by providing a plot and possibility for the reader to understand the story through empathy. Finally, the analysis of empirical material should apply to a wider set of social phenomena (Anderson, 2006).

Autoethnography need not be an individual and lonely effort (although often this is the case). This autoethnographic study started out as an individual effort, but the bulk of the problematization, theorizing, analysis and story-telling emerged out of co-reflection and co-authorship (Johansson and Jones, 2019) to improve the ability to scrutinize the interaction among researchers,
the environment and other social actors (as noted above by Anderson). Having not been part of a bullying context provides an opportunity for critical, imaginative and emphatic reflection, and as it turned out, the conceptual encounterer was instrumental in facilitating an understanding of the possibility of having become a victim and a bystander, in this case, showing the possibility of how we might view ourselves, rather than how we expect others to view us (Boncori and Smith, 2019).

The procedure of co-reflected and co-authored autoethnography

One of us, henceforth ‘the autoethnographer’, decided to conduct the current research when he was already a member of a group of academics at one European university, which enabled the analysis of social relationships within this community. As he collected and recorded materials for 2 years through a research diary and constant self-observation, he engaged in self-reflection to understand his reactions to the behaviours of others. After the field study ended, the autoethnographer moved to another country and teamed up with a researcher, henceforth ‘the conceptual encounterer’. A conceptual encounterer acts as a friend, supporting the autoethnographer’s feelings and judgement with empathy, presence, expertise and knowledge (Boncori and Smith, 2019; see De Rivera, 2006; Kempster and Stewart, 2010; McLeod, 2001).

Dialogues about the events and experiences started, from which emerged a process that attempted ‘to capture a process of the researcher writing about her/himself, with such writing subsequently being interrogated by a co-author to enhance and deepen reflexivity through a two-way process that generates a co-constructed narrative “sandwich”’ (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2012: 329; see Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

The use of autoethnography must involve the researcher’s ethical responsibility and sensitivity (Ellis, 2007; Lapadat, 2017). Hence, we are honest and construct the narration from real personal experiences only. To protect the well-being of other persons mentioned in the research, we preserve anonymity by not naming the actual university and by substituting fictional names for informants (Medford, 2006). In terms of anonymity, we follow the Swedish Research Council, which underscores that participation should not subject individuals to the risk of being harmed. Granting anonymity to an organization (even the country) and to individuals implies a contextual loss, narrowing how the story can be told. Anonymity, however, allows us to add context by seeking to understand the consequences that bullying might have for the other people in an organization as well as considering the bystander phenomenon.

The presented story is divided into three parts. In the first part, the autoethnographer’s story is presented, as it is derived from memories and diary inquiries made before he departed the country. It is a story of being a victim. In the second part, the conceptual encounterer presents his story based on memories of the relationship with the autoethnographer when he arrived in Sweden. In the final part, the autoethnographer started realizing his role as a bystander.

The story of the victim. The story begins at a time when the university was implementing neoliberal and management-led governmental solutions to achieve excellence, mainly quantitative assessments of academic performance based on publications in top-ranked journals and research grants. A tenured faculty member (‘Peter’, a pseudonym) with a high academic title and administrative position started implementing neoliberal reforms in the department where I was employed.

Peter made me an offer to quit the current university department in which we were both working and to join a new one in which he would be the head. He presented me with a very attractive narration of the financial possibilities and excellent research results I would have if I joined his team, which would reach an international level of excellence. To my surprise, he presented the current head of our department (‘Catelyn’) in a highly unfavourable light, mocking her and depreciating
her academic achievements. I treated Catelyn as my authority and academic friend; she had helped me many times in my brief career, providing real possibilities for self-development. During the conversation with Peter, I realized that there must be a major conflict between him and Catelyn, and if I agreed to leave with Peter, then she could be in serious trouble. She could lose her department, and I would lose her confidence.

I agreed to go along with Peter’s suggestion. For a young father of a recently born child, the danger of losing a job was terrifying, and the possible improvement in my academic career and consequently in my economic status was highly attractive. I was extremely overworked, had no money in my bank account and was prepared to fight for a better future for my family. Peter, as I saw it then, seemed to have a plan for fulfilling my dream.

A couple of weeks later, I learned about Peter’s actions. He started intimidating people who disagreed with his decisions and argued and defended himself with arguments drawn from the discourse of meritocracy and academic excellence. Under the guise of weak academic performance, he reduced the influence of ‘difficult’ academics by spreading negative information about them. I started being more watchful and began realizing that he was systematically casting aspersions on my colleagues in my presence. He was also spreading negative information about me (which I learned from my colleagues) and about people close to me, such as the supervisor and reviewers of my doctoral thesis. Moreover, he planned employment reduction by implementing a new teaching programme. The teaching programme was financed by external sources, which required entirely different competencies from those of most of the faculty members. Colleagues started describing Peter as a callous person and started to express that he must be stopped.

I have to admit that I developed a way of thinking and acting that was similar to that of Peter. He was supported by other persons who were also depreciating Catelyn during the meetings: when being involved in those meetings, I did nothing to stop the mocking process. On another occasion, when talking to one of Peter’s strongest supporters, I grabbed Catelyn’s book from the shelf and used it for fun as a table prop: I wanted to make a good impression and present myself as someone who was supporting Peter as well.

At this time, I was writing a book on workplace dignity in academia, and believe it or not, I did not relate the contents of the book to the events occurring around me. I had lost my curiosity and passion for the theme and only tried fitting my methodology, arguments and style of writing into the imaginary preferences of people who worked at the degree commission. I was convinced that completing this book would grant me a permanent contract. I never finalized this book.

In reality, after my decision to stay with Peter, I found it very difficult to work. I felt a sense of guilt in relation to Catelyn as a friend and academic colleague. Just after my decision to stay with Peter, the communication between me and Catelyn broke down: I was wondering how she got to know about my actions, what her feelings were, but was too afraid to send her an email or to meet her in the university corridors. Moreover, nearly every day, there was much talk about negative occurrences at our faculty related to Peter’s movements. New information was continuously revealed and the emotional tension became almost unbearable.

Finally, I was informally asked for a meeting by one of the university’s government representatives. This person informed me that the meeting would concern a research project in which we were both participating. I knew that he knew what was happening and that the subject of our conversation might be different, but the direction of the conversation would depend on me. I also felt that my faculty colleagues were waiting for the result of this meeting. During this meeting, I expressed everything I knew about the case, including my fears and opinions.

A few days later, Peter resigned from his administrative role. There was, however, a concern that he might retain employment. It seemed as if the only way to permanently close the case was to submit a formal accusation of bullying to the university government. I felt that some of my
colleagues wanted me to pursue this option. At one point, I was ready to do so or to take action together with other victims. According to the rules, the accusation must be made non-anonymously, and the mobbing committee also gathers administrative personnel who, at the time, I did not trust: could they handle personal data confidentially? After reading the documents that described the mobbing procedures at my university, I decided not to pursue this line of action. I was unsure whether my experience could be described as bullying, and I feared for my future employability. I decided to change workplaces and left the country. I wanted to forget about the experience, but after a couple of months, I realized that it is impossible to sweep what I had experienced under the rug. It was impossible to live as though nothing had happened.

The story of the conceptual encounterer. When I first met the junior academic at my university, I came to know a person who was weary of nearly all matters related to academia. Clearly, previous experiences were a great burden. This fact showed with almost too much clarity in the junior academic’s concern to learn ‘how to fit in’; he was always in a mode of conformity. Time passed and misunderstandings gradually emerged between the two of us (as well with other colleagues of mine). To be honest, I felt that this junior academic was a bit of a whiner. This, I think, is not an uncommon diagnosis in academia. We started to talk about things that had been.

With the help of Nina Krebs (1999), I can retrospectively recognize that I had encountered an edgewalker who had not pushed for change and thereby had been violating himself and his beliefs. An edgewalker is also someone who feels completely lost and alone, who seeks integrity in his thoughts and actions and who requires the acceptance and attention of others. An edgewalker is someone who searches for the remediation and mitigation of injured dignity. Thus, this person is far from a whiner. The struggle against indifference and the search for care in the workplace are ways of protecting one’s dignity (Hicks, 2011; Melé, 2014; Zawadzki, 2018), particularly when someone is experiencing bullying.

For quite some time, the junior academic portrayed himself and others as victims, and there was a clear, dominant figure looming large behind all this, namely, Peter. I tried to critically, but empathically, persuade the autoethnographer that, first, there is a fine line between being a victim and a bystander, and second, of the idea of the junior academic being a bystander who actively and deliberatively made certain choices. This was clearly a ‘no-go zone’, and in his eyes, I saw the pain that my analysis inflicted on him.

The story of the bystander. The first few times I discussed my case with the conceptual encounterer, I experienced him as a cold and distant person who did not understand my hurt and pain. I was convinced that I was a victim of bullying, but the encounterer did not show enough compassion. Instead, he was trying to redirect my attention from the victim–perpetrator experience to the bystander phenomenon. We discussed my experience for months, and gradually, I started perceiving encounterer as a caring friend and our discussions as a therapy. As a result of our conversations, I identified myself as not only a victim but also a bystander: someone who made both active choices (to follow Peter) as well as passive ones (not responding to rumours and mocking, not supporting academic friends) but who suffered greatly from the same bullying behaviour that affected other academic colleagues. From these discussions came the decision to submit a formal accusation to the university mobbing committee. By doing this, I started to denaturalize my paternalistic obedience and break free from the academic taboo of unethical practices in a university.

What surprised me, however, was that not everyone who defined themselves as victims were happy with my decision. Breaking free from the bystander position, and from other victims/bystanders, is challenging; doing so requires not only that the person break free from himself or herself, so to speak, but also that he or she take responsible action that may ‘require individuals to
act against established social norms, laws and rules in which the individual is embedded’ (Jensen, 2010: 426). Doing so might even require going against the will of the bullied, that is, the victims who, for psychological reasons or for fear of retaliation, do not want to relive history.

Their reactions explain why I still have mixed feelings: feeling harmed, fearful, guilty and compassionate. I am also thinking about a possible reconciliation. To this day, I try to accustom myself to the complexity of my feelings, to be more tolerant with myself and my internal struggle and to try to discern what actually happened. Finally, recognizing having been a bystander is painful, and even if the reluctance to openly support other victims might be considered an indication of vulnerability (Lewis and Orford, 2005) or of oppression from bullying, I nonetheless justified the aggressor’s actions and supported the bullying culture. Given the context, my behaviour and motives seem understandable, but I nevertheless internalized obedience (Milgram, 2005 [1974]), became an active part of paternalistic academic culture and exercised the power of the oppressor. For a while, I also saw nothing wrong with career and money as ends in themselves. In my case, I believe that career and money worked as ‘moral sleeping pills’ (Bauman, 1989: 26).

**Discussion and conclusions**

In this case, we see that Peter strives to become influential by utilizing the neoliberal university’s ideal (by leveraging the discourse of meritocracy and academic excellence, financial possibilities and weak academic performance, among others). Neoliberalization in society in general and in universities in particular does not, of course, aim to increase the prevalence of bullying. However, neoliberal principles might prompt bullying to serve as a normal situation based on which managerial ‘tools’ are constructed in various ways that seem morally acceptable. As Young (2003) explains, ‘[. . .] what counts as wrong is generally conceived as a deviation from a baseline. Implicitly, we assume a normal background situation that is morally acceptable, if not ideal’ (p. 41). For Young (2003), globalization has spurred ‘normality’ in the form of exploited economic free-zone labour that works under slave-like conditions; in our case, the neoliberalization of academia has spurred ‘normality’ in the form of management-led practices in which bullying becomes part of the game.

Peter’s management-led change also intensified the adiaphorization of the organization, and it became very difficult for the autoethnographer (but also for other junior as well as senior academics) to assess whether behaviours such as spreading negative and false information, becoming isolated from others, undermining academic competence through slander and intimidation, and manipulating through gaslighting should be considered ‘normal’ given the neoliberal ‘background’, or if they are instead morally (and legally) deviant.

This analytic autoethnographic study thus reveals how a neoliberal university transforms academics into manageable subjects within the excellence game (being “abstracted from ‘total persons’”; Ten Bos, 1997: 1005) and how, in turn, this support unethical practices, particularly when the latter produce, or seem to be able to produce, desirable outputs. In a neoliberal university, bullying might be perceived as beyond good and evil, as something natural when travelling the highly intense road to excellence.

To further complicate the judgement of those involved in bullying, Peter also seems to represent the classic academic ideology of paternalism. Paternalism in academia may be a matter of honour, as it stems from a feeling of responsibility for people lower in the hierarchy, but this feeling might create an ultra-conformist monoculture (Holligan, 2011) and reduce the possibility of disagreement (Sommers, 2018). It should also be noted that academic paternalism creates the possibility of care but simultaneously might reduce levels of self-worth and self-respect (Fleming, 2005). As a tension management device (Knights and McCabe, 2001), paternalism
might also facilitate trust among lower ranked academics. In this story, paternalistic relations became a weapon used by the bully to cherry-pick those who are useful, to exclude those who resist and to ‘win’ the hearts and minds of junior academics as a trophy in the symbolic war between the academic power holders.

The main argument advanced here is that neoliberal reforms in academia can reinforce paternalistic relationships as significant in career development and normalize the natural subordination of disadvantaged groups, such as junior academics, to those in power (Holligan, 2011). Such a setting provides a fertile but horrific ground for bullying (Friedenberg, 2008; Lester, 2013; Pheko, 2018a, 2018b; Twale, 2018; Twale and De Luca, 2008; Westhues, 2004). In relation to the first research question (In what way does neoliberalization as a locally managerial strategy enable the bullying of young academics?), this study reveals how neoliberal principles put into practice at a university foster unethical behaviours, including workplace bullying.

As Peter’s regime continued, the autoethnographer observed how scholars were treated, which created a painful and dehumanizing culture of work rooted in negative emotions and everyday storytelling of the unfavourable aspects of the workplace. The bonds of trust and commitment were eroding at the university, and academics realized that ‘distrust and uncertainty’ had become the norm (Warren, 2014: 80). The autoethnographer not only witnessed this development but also started living this ‘immoral behaviour’ as a ‘mode of self-organizing’ (Jensen, 2014: 27). Moreover, the situation became so obscure that it was difficult to separate truth from rumour (Crothers et al., 2009; De Cuyper et al., 2009; Pheko, 2018b). The autoethnographer was so manipulated by the false stories spread by the bully that, at one moment, he even asked himself who the victim was and who the bully was. He was afraid to formally denounce bullying at the university level and did not know with whom he should speak about his feelings.

In this case, it is not until an individual takes the form of the autoethnographer that the ‘spell’ is broken – causing Peter to leave. How can we theoretically understand this? One explanation is that in our case, the neoliberal university has succeeded in subsidiarizing and therefore also individualizing collective problems (Bauman, 2017), a modern form of organization that prevents collective will and actions from happening (Jensen, 2018). With Sartre (2004 [1960]), we could say that at this neoliberal university, academics act as a serial collective. A serial collective is the opposite of a group. Using Iris Marion Young’s (1994) appropriation of Sartre, she states that

[each goes about his or her own business. However, each is also aware of the serialized context of that activity in a social collective whose structure constitutes them within certain limits and constraints. [. . .]

Thus, in the series, individuals are isolated but not alone. (p. 725)

The outcome of belonging to a serial collective, paraphrasing Young (1994: 734), is that neither junior nor more senior academics can escape the markings of the neoliberal university, but the question of how the neoliberal university marks their life is their own and only their own.

This study has shown that bystanders can play a crucial role in preventing or supporting bullying: those who do not report the witnessed bullying are reproducing and strengthening the power of the oppressor as well as the power of bully culture. As our story shows, however, being immersed in bully culture makes it very difficult to clearly explain the ongoing processes, including clearly identifying bystanders, victims or even perpetrators. In relation to the second research question (How does neoliberalism in academia prevent young academics from contesting bullying (e.g. reporting or confronting the bully)?), this study reveals the complex and disturbing experience of academic bullying, including mixed emotions, moral dilemmas and personal confusion, which often results in irrational and inconsistent behaviour, making it hard for young academics to resist a bullying culture.
Implications

The costs of workplace bullying are devastating for both individuals and university organizations. Exposure to bullying can result in burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, fatigue and paranoia, sleep difficulties, and consequently increased job insecurity and intentions to leave (Jennifer, 2003; Trépanier et al., 2015). Victims may also engage in self-blame and be convinced that they provoke unethical behaviours displayed by the bully (Twale, 2018). At an organizational level, bullying increases absenteeism and turnover, lowers productivity, contributes to a lack of trust and erodes the organization’s public reputation (Hoel et al., 2011).

Bullying in academia, as we previously have emphasized, also tends to be indirect rather than direct (Keashly and Neuman, 2010; Twale and De Luca, 2008), and many individuals describe it as ‘part of the job’ (Friedenberg, 2008; Khoo, 2010; Lester, 2013). This is serious and quite disturbing considering that academic work supposedly should be founded on critical debate. Neoliberalization and adiaphorization might have spurred ‘normality’ in the form of critical debates, with bullying being part of the same game (supporting this point, see, for example, Westhue, 2004).

Academic bullying is not only difficult to discover and prove but also difficult to resist. Human resources departments at universities, trade unions or other units that oversee cases of bullying tend to support organizational rather than individual interests. As Twale (2018) observed, ‘campus administrators with the support of HR may seek to trivialize or normalize the negative bully behaviours as being neither uncivil, hostile, nor harassing’ (p. 147). This reinforcement might occur particularly when administrators have not been educated on workplace bullying or have not personally experienced bullying, so they lack empathy towards the victims and knowledge about the process.

Bullying (and other forms of malpractice) cannot be battled only by individual academics (and other personnel). Bullying in academia is essentially an issue for the university organization to address. Higher education policymakers, as well as university deans and top management, should invest greater effort into developing clear anti-bullying procedures to protect the victims. However, the neoliberal university might have changed what should be considered acceptable, and thus, countervailing powers (Galbraith, 1952) must be formed to create a culture of recognition, fairness, trustworthiness and independence at work. An important aspect of this process is the (re)unionization and the reestablishment of union space for academic personnel to consult their fears and negative experiences.

Ultimately, academics also need to act. We would suggest creating new forms of academic agora that seek to strengthen the academic collective and through which it is possible to break free from the ‘chain’ of the serial collective. Establishing academic groups makes it possible to ‘reinvent’ a joint will that can be used to launch change. The neoliberal university can possibly resist their academic ‘employees’; therefore, we also suggest including the students. No university can resist change from students.

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Note

1. In differentiating between bullying and mobbing, we follow Pheko (2018a) and Friedenberg (2008), who define mobbing as unethical practices carried out systematically by more than one co-worker against a colleague(s) and bullying as unethical practices carried out by a single person against a colleague(s). Both bullying and mobbing can have similar consequences.
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