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# The social organisation of boasting in the neoliberal university

This article unpacks the social construction of the “ideal academic” in the context of major shifts in the governance of academia that have introduced managerial practices, standardised notions of excellence and accounting logics with the aim of increasing the efficiency and quality of higher education and academic knowledge production. More specifically it explores how the enacting of this ideal involves practices of boasting and explores how people are differently positioned in that regard. Drawing on a three-year ethnographic study at Aalto University in Finland the article shows how boasting involves the (re)production of gendered and classed social inequalities. I draw on the resources of Institutional Ethnography which enables me to analyse social relations of gender and class and show how culturally and situationally specific forms of boasting, become textually recognised and encouraged as appropriate behaviour for the “ideal academic”.

**Key words**: Boasting; The neoliberal University; Gender and Class relations; Institutional Ethnography; Finland.

Shifts in global and national governance of academia have resulted in the introduction of managerial practices and auditing technologies aimed at ensuring that academics are enacting institutional intentions. Among these figure standardised quality evaluation criteria and various forms of activity input-output-throughput reporting that aim to secure the comparability and competitiveness of academics and universities within and across national borders. Following the introduction of these measures academic organisations and cultures have become obsessed with proof of academic ‘innovativeness’, ‘societal impact’ and ‘value for money’. This so to the extent, that the lines between knowledge pursuits and economic pursuits have become increasingly blurred (e.g. Lewis & Shore 2017; Colley 2013). The standardised quality criteria mediate a new academic ideal against which all are evaluated. (e.g. Lund 2015). These changes have strengthened hierarchies, competition and institutional bullying, promoting and naturalizing stress, anxiety, envy, burn-out, precariousness and de-professionalisation. (e.g. Petrina et al 2015; Blackmore 2017). The market-like dynamics shaping academic culture have, it would seem, instigated a form of perpetual competition and an environment where academics struggle with a doubt as to whether they are *motivated enough* to live up to their surroundings as well as their own expectations.

Boasting can be considered a central driving force in neoliberal universities striving to become ‘world class’. Boasting is an increasingly visible, encouraged and expected practice in contemporary academic life, shaping the ways in which academics present themselves and interact. However, boasting is also a practice that awakens diverging, even conflicting, feelings and responses, depending on people’s position within the social relations of gender and class.

The following conversation with Tuuli [pseudonym], a junior female academic, who speaks to me about writing a job application, marks the point of entry into my explication of the practice of boasting in neoliberal academia.

> **Tuuli:** I emphasised research […]and wrote that I found teaching a great source of inspiration and I want to continue doing this work and what’s the value of teaching and blah blah blah …and then I of course said that I was *world class* and blah blah blah
>
> **Rebecca:** Did you use Aalto language[1]?
>
> **Tuuli:** [replies immediately/i.e. She knows exactly what I mean by “Aalto language”] Yeah I did […] I actually asked one of my close colleagues to look over my research plan in order to put in more of this *excellence vocabulary* emphasising how fantastic I am…so it wasn't “*my international colleagues*” but “*leading scholars of the field*” and its wasn't “*good*” but it was “*excellent*” …and all this kind of terminology was used in my most recent application too …but in my teaching portfolio for the lecture track application I was *also* very true to myself […] I really wrote that from my heart …and what I actually did was that I took *extracts* from course feedback and put that in the portfolio to illustrate that this is what students say about me

[1] Refers to Aalto University, and the particular ‘rhetoric of excellence or grandiosity’ that shapes communication on the university websites, events, speeches and brochures.

**Rebecca**: that's a great idea!

**Tuuli:** …and because the course feedback was *so excellent* [laughs]… I thought it was really nice to put them there …so that's how I did that […] I actually have this dissonance in a way […] a conflict within *myself* because I do not like to *act* like that…but then again I said *well okay I am playing the game* and I am putting this in like this …and it became *really evident* to me at a later stage

The quote displays a disjuncture: A conflict between what Tuuli feels she *ought* to do, and what she would *prefer* to do.

While the 'Aalto language' would initially seem to be adding a few superlatives to an already existing sentence, and hence be a resource equally available to all, the picture becomes more complex when we delve further into the ways in which Tuuli, and her junior female colleagues, engage in the work of boasting; and ultimately decide what to highlight and what to downplay. The picture is further complicated when we engage with *how* and *where* boasting should be done, and *who* is able to legitimately engage in this practice, and increase their value as a result. In this article I will unpack the social organisation of boasting within the context of neoliberal academia.

## INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY, STANDPOINT AND DATA PRODUCTION

I draw on the theoretical and methodological resources of Institutional Ethnography (2005), to explicate how local embodied work knowledge is organised in translocal and text mediated ruling relations (Smith 2005). Ruling relations is both a material and relational concept, defined and theorized by Dorothy Smith as *"text-mediated and text-based systems of 'communication',*

*‘knowledge’, ‘information’, ‘regulation’, ‘control’ and the like* […] *built into a specialized complex of objectified forms of organization and relationship”* (Smith 1999:77).

In this article my interest is in explicating how the work of boasting is organised in ruling relations of excellence. That is, the text-mediated concepts, abstractions, discourses and ideologies that come together in the construction of the ‘ideal academic’, and the methodologies and procedures used to make people’s merits measurable and comparable (e.g. Shore 2008). Ultimately, exploring such texts and the ways in which they are activated by people across different local sites, is central to understanding how institutional intentions of becoming ‘world-class’ are made actionable through practices of boasting. (Smith 1990a; 1990b). Rooted in the standpoint feminist tradition (Smith 2004a), Institutional Ethnography starts inquiry from the perspective of those whose experience is downplayed or silenced within institutional language and representations of the world. Explicating those experiences may help me problematise and challenge dominant notions of ‘excellence’, the ‘ideal academic’ and indeed, the practice of boasting. Institutional Ethnography differs from other standpoint theories ( e.g. Harding 1993, 2007; Collins 2004; Hartsock 2004) in that it starts from a subject position within a complex of social relations. The ‘epistemic privilege’ assigned to junior female academics, whose standpoint I take in this article, is not an automatic one (Smith 2004b). The choice of standpoint is empirically and contextually justified through its ability to point me in the direction of problematizing dominant institutions, practices and representations of the world. (Smith 2005). This also means that gender and class relations cannot be theoretically assumed to matter, but rather that they must be discovered empirically through opening up the data (see DeVault 1995; Smith 2009).

**Mapping the experiences of junior female academics**

In order to analyse the disjunctures arising between textual representations of academic work and embodied experiences of everyday life, I chose the standpoint of early career female academics at Aalto University in Finland as my point of entry for discovering ruling relations of boasting.

At the time of the empirical study, these people defined themselves as critical scholars and were at the final stages of their PhD studies or in temporary fixed term research or teaching positions with no certainty of future employment. In order to explore how their everyday experiences were shaped I generated various empirical materials. I produced field notes from observational participation (Moeran 2009) over a period of, altogether, three years, and gathered policy and organizational texts in order to make sense of the institutional processes within which the early career academics worked.

Throughout my research process I was, myself, a junior female academic. This required that I carefully reflect on my own subject position in the field. My participants and I were learning from and evaluating each other. I was simultaneously a colleague, a possible future competitor, a friend and a researcher engaging in field work, embedded, as they were, in the ruling and social relations of gender and class within neoliberal academia. This required careful consideration of power relations, and sensitivity towards my own participation in the institutional discourses and practice (see e.g. Wolff 1996).

I carried out interviews with the purpose of explicating how their activities and experience became socially organised. In the accounts of early career female academics, I searched for textual clues that would allow me to explicate how translocal ruling relations of excellence entered into, were activated, and ultimately coordinated in their everyday work. Through explicating how texts, discourses and knowledge were taken up, I sought to illuminate the link between the local lived

experience and the translocal processes of governance (DeVault & McCoy 2006). In particular, I asked how early career female academics constructed and evaluated themselves, in order to unpack the effects of ruling relations.

I conducted interviews with 35 people, located differently within Aalto University, and transcribed each of the interviews myself. Each interview lasted between one-and-half and three hours, and some people were interviewed several times throughout the course of my three years of field work. Most research participants were early career female academics, but junior male academics, male and female professors, as well as academic and administrative managers were also interviewed in order to understand the sequences of action and knowledge that early career female academics were part of. The interviewees were from different departments and schools at Aalto: including business studies, economics, art, architecture, chemistry and technology. The departments differed in terms of the number of female faculty members and the degree of critical reflexivity with regard to gender and intersecting issues. However, the majority of my participants were from units where women were relatively well represented and there was at least some awareness of gender-related issues and very seldom, if any, explicit awareness or mention of class. The relative awareness of gender and silencing of class is common in the Nordics (Meriläinen et al 2012) and affects the way in which empirical analysis can be carried out. Indeed, it requires careful attention to the subtle occurrence of gender and class relations in practices of boasting.

Based on the textual clues offered in interviews and observational situations, I located dominant texts and mapped the links between them. In keeping with the methods of Institutional Ethnography, texts became the observable link between the local and translocal, which made it possible to make sense of how people's experiences were organised and coordinated by the

ideological codes, discourses, and ways of knowing, mediated by texts that they read, encountered (e.g. through participation in events), interpreted, and activated.

The ruling relations of gender and class, excellence and the work of boasting emerged in different forms from the experiences of junior female academics. In some interviews junior female scholars were not in doubt of their academic competences, but disliked the institutional developments. They problematized the organizational processes rather than themselves. In other interviews junior female academics expressed being worried about not being good enough, of not being able to live up to the new quality standards, and pointing towards particular people, situations and events that had triggered their worries or anxieties. They problematized themselves rather than the processes. However, in all interviews they would point towards events and situations where particular accomplishments and success stories were highlighted, or particular people received recognition. Firstly, I located which activities were elevated and which where downplayed in the work of boasting. Secondly, I located how the practice of boasting coined forms of competence and potential related to the construction of the 'ideal academic' at Aalto. Thirdly, I unpacked how the practice of boasting produces, and is produced by, an academic culture that is characterised by competitiveness, global masculinity and middleclass entitlement; involving a celebration of depoliticised and individualised 'excellence', egalitarian elitism and the privatization of anxiety. Finally, this then allowed me explicate how social inequalities are produced along lines of gender and class.

**Site of study: Aalto University and Finnish higher educational reform**

Finland is located in the periphery of academia that is dominated by the hegemonic position of the English language, by Anglo-American academics, universities and understandings of the world (Meriläinen et al 2008). Until the 1990s the Finnish state provided funding for and defined the organisation of universities, however, since 1995 reforms have aimed at making Finland more international, entrepreneurial, globally comparable and competitive. Universities, disciplines and academic work have been redefined around international and standardised performance evaluations and accreditations (Ahola & Hoffman 2012; Aula & Tienari 2011). A radical change in 2009-2010 introduced a new University Act and funding scheme (Välimaa 2012); these altogether resulted in the marketization and neoliberalisation of Finnish universities.

A central feature in the latest reforms in Finland was a number of university mergers. One of which was the site of my fieldwork: Aalto University. The merger was to be between three Helsinki based university institutions and was to create the basis for a Finnish 'world-class' university. 'World class' was defined as featuring on the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education ranking list by 2020. Within Aalto, a research assessment exercise named 'Striving for Excellence' was conducted in 2009. The subsequent assessment report advised all units to cut down on short-term research projects, increase research leadership, and recruit people with more international experience and higher ambitions.

In achieving its ambitious goals, the decision to employ a competitive, and in Finland unprecedented, U.S. style Tenure Track system was seen as central by the university management (Herbert & Tienari 2013). The early career female academics, who stood outside the system, were compelled to choose the academic activities that would increase their chances of securing a position.

The criteria for entering the Tenure Track system, emphasizing publication records and international experience, were implemented with the purpose of finding the *best* candidates for the job, and supporting those to reach their full potential. Recruitment and career progress would occur through 'systematic evaluation' on the basis of principles of 'predictability, transparency and comparability with international standards.'[2] These standards were held by academic managers to be neutral and progressive alternatives to previous recruitment practices, and they would automatically combat gender and intersecting forms of inequality.

## THE WORK OF BOASTING

> **You are invited to High 5 […]** High 5 is a great way to express success, celebration or affection between friends, colleagues, and co-students, without the formality of a handshake or the intimacy of a hug. It is especially used in moments full of victory (Aalto University invitation to join High Five internet Forum, email, 2015)

In spring 2015 I received an email invitation to join the Aalto University *High Five Forum*. The University's internal webpages explained that this forum was 'not *just* about marvelling', but 'about experiencing and participating'. A forum dedicated to sharing 'treats' on 'research, experiences and results' (Aalto Inside, 2016). This was one of many examples of the University actively encouraging and supporting boasting, i.e. the use of 'Excellence Vocabulary'. My colleagues and I were constantly reminded to be proud of our results and 'share' these with others. I began to recognise boasting as a key element in making actionable the institutional intention of becoming 'world class' by 2020: boasting would draw attention to particular normative standards

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[2] See http://www.aalto.fi/en/about/careers/tenure_track/evaluation/

enacted by actual people and, additionally, would motivate people to engage in the pursuit of similar standards. The boasting practice is recognisable across diverging work places, universities and national borders, although there may be some contextual variation.

Many felt uncomfortable with using the language of excellence and some did not feel they could legitimately engage in boasting. Tuuli and other junior female academics learned that what *ought* to be boasted about is that which was also rewarded in standardised tenure track evaluation criteria: that is, publications in top journals, international mobility and collaboration, success rate in applying for external research grants.

> **Liisa:** …research is what counts and you are supposed to publish *a lot* in good journals. You should work with international colleagues and network with scholars from important and big name universities, so that it looks like you're doing world class research. They are so proud if most of the applicants [for a Tenure Track position] are from abroad. You do really have to give it your all to the career and understand the game. This system emphasises these quality measures so much and I see people doing this more of this instrumental type of networking and activities.

Teaching portfolios, while important, are hard to make comparable, measurable and hence not quite as readily *boastable*. However, as revealed in my conversation with Tuuli, teaching can be made boastable through the good student feedback.

**Enacting strategic goals and reshaping academic work**

A very colourful brochure-version of Aalto University's strategy 'in brief' (2012) was handed out to all members of faculty and staff. It outlined 'Clearly defined goals', which were argued to be 'prerequisites for a complex organisation to progress effectively and productively in one direction'.

Although I have no way of knowing whether my colleagues actually read the strategy brochures that had been delivered to their pigeon-holes, they would certainly be exposed to its content in weekly news letters, events and meetings. The strategy provides goals and solutions and thus, *implicitly*, also provides categories by which we can identify problems in need of a solution (Knights & Morgan 1991). The logic is linear and based on the notion that you either move forward or you stand still. The objectives for action, and pillars of the strategy, were initially defined the year before the merger took place, in the 'Striving for Excellence' (2009) research assessment exercise. Since, a Scientific Advisory Board has been following up biannually; evaluating department and school performance in terms of reaching the strategic goals identified in 2009. Shortcomings identified as obstructing the attainment of 'world class' status were listed as: lack of international orientation and mobility; faculty being insufficiently challenged to pursue a glorious career; inappropriate coaching, support and guidance to make rational and responsible career choices. It was suggested that 'Finnish strengths' should be emphasised in the effort to identify solutions and overcome these problems. 'Finnish strengths' were not detailed here, but other organisational texts defined these as 'hard work, perseverance and creativity', 'egalitarianism' and 'equality'. The mobilisation of these so-called Finnish strengths would enable the enactment of the new standards of excellence and ultimately the necessary transformation of their workplace. The quote below from my conversation with one junior female academic, Liisa [pseudonym], illustrates how she picked up on these requirements and how they shaped and changed her experience of working in academia:

> **Liisa:** I had been away on maternity leave. And when I came back I felt really depressed and I didn't know what was going on […] the culture had changed. Everyone started talking

about publications and it began influencing me, because I realised that I had to start doing and thinking in political terms… the game of the whole thing …that became a constant struggle.

Liisa is not particularly well aligned with the textually meditated definition of 'Finnish strengths' that supposedly leads to 'excellence'. Examining Liisa's experiences, and similar experiences of others, allows me to unpack the textual notion of 'Finnish strengths' as one that is aligned with neoliberal rhetoric of 'choice, freedom, individualism, competition and initiative' and one that naturalises a tolerance of dividing academics into 'winners and losers' (Nikunen 2011, 3). Indeed, while the Scientific Advisory Board argued that Finnish values of equality and egalitarianism could be a competitive advantage for Aalto, they also pinpointed that management should think carefully about *how* they spoke of such values, since the significant advantages (in terms of salary, health care and influence) offered to those who enter a tenure track contract are counter to the egalitarianism that managers would claim the Tenure Track System to exemplify. The tenure track system ultimately holds the individualised agent responsible for managing her 'assets' and approximating 'excellence' (Gershon 2011). To understand the social organisation of boasting I will in the following sections engage with interconnected dimensions of gender and class relations.

## THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF BOASTING: GENDER AND CLASS RELATIONS

**Helena:** I think that to be able to do this work properly …to do it…it demands a lot of time and its very stressful…like *you* said you work a lot and during the weekends …but that's

> impossible for me and when I hear these kind of things I think *wow* how can I ever manage this […] should I give it up…because it's not possible to put this much time into it […]
>
> **Rebecca**: but on the other hand is it not reasonable when you have a family and it's difficult to make all the ends meet in terms of time
>
> **Helena**: yes but […] there are lots of talented women and researchers with families back home and children …and they have high positions and they work like crazy …

During the course of the interview Helena burst into tears. I had to switch off the recorder to comfort her. The fear and insecurity of "not being a good enough worker" had become disabling. Boasting – a practice I had been participating in myself, as Helena pinpointed above – is a practice that achieves legitimacy from people's ability to live up to the ruling relations of excellence. As Helena's experience highlights: boasting is enacted through pinpointing the number of hours spent at work as much as actual achievements. Boasting continually reminds us to evaluate ourselves and each other in terms of who holds the capacity to live up to the standards without falling ill. Helena does not question the practice of boasting itself, but rather uses it as a perpetual reminder of standards by which to evaluate herself. Helena's experience highlights that neither excellence nor boasting is neutral, but shaped in struggles as to whose experience count in living up to the 'ideal academic' and which activities are worthy of boasting about.

**Boasting as performing global masculinity**

In Finland, the long history of female participation in the public sphere, the high representation of women in higher education and in full-time employment, state-feminism and women friendly welfare policies are all part of the national narrative and self-understanding (e.g. Marakowitz 1996;

Holli & Kantola 2007). This was also mirrored in the Scientific Advisory Board report, where Finnish gender equality and egalitarianism were seen as particularly Finnish values that gave Finland an edge in the global competition. The Aalto management on several occasions claimed the tenure track system's objective and neutral evaluation criteria would lead to the elimination of gender inequality.

Despite these dominant narratives, junior female academics time and again told me how they considered 'gender' to be at the very root of the struggles related to living up to the criteria of excellence. Following a seminar a group of the female academics had arranged to discuss their prospects within the changing university with the senior staff, one junior female academic, Katja [pseudonym] told me how it had "a *lot* to do with gender […]. They have children and they just have a *certain number of hours* per day they can devote to this work and then comes all this *measurement* stuff. You know they are expected to *produce."*

Pursuing recognition as a valuable academic while attending to the responsibilities of motherhood involves "significant tensions" (Wolf-Wendel & Ward 2003, 121). Research has shown that for many this would involve working harder and sleeping less, in order to handle the anxieties of evaluation. *Not* coping with the tension became, within the seminar planned by junior female academics, a topic that could be discussed openly. However, as Helena's experience pinpoints, for many others it would be privatized – something that "you cannot bring with you to the university" and that many women do not openly discuss – for the reason that "not coping" would be equivalent to "not being an acceptable academic" (Acker & Armenti 2004, 11)

Katja and her colleagues experience how the standards of quality are organised in ruling relations of gender, as these are (re)produced within a heteronormative order and sexual division of labour, holding men and women accountable to expected sayings and doings.  Vertical and horizontal

gender segregation remains an unresolved issue in Finland and, despite managerial claims, at Aalto University. Statistical breakdowns show that female academics below the age of forty deliver the majority of teaching and teaching preparation hours. They occupy the majority of part-time positions, take the vast majority of parental leaves, and few of them apply for, or reach, the top academic positions (see She Figures 2009; University HR 2012; Haataja 2009; Hausmann et al 2011). This means that female academics are systematically disadvantaged in living up to tenure track requirements.

The gendered nature of the tenure track evaluation criteria became visible from the standpoint of junior female academics. The criteria were written from an unacknowledged position of what I call 'global masculinity'. This is a discourse that is otherwise known from the corporate world and elite (Kuoppala & Näppilä 2012; Parker & Weick 2013; Willmott 1995), but which has, with the speed of academic capitalism, entered higher educational institutions. It has three main features: First, the masculinity of *geocentrism* involves international or global orientation. Second, the masculinity of *careerism* involves commitment to organisational goals, to an extent that may lead to sacrifice of personal commitments, such as family. Careerism also involves focusing on *particular types of tasks*, involving the classification of some tasks as being of more importance than others for furthering one's career. Third, the masculinity of *informalism* involves homosocial networking with excellent men and women across the globe. These three discourses are masculine, not because women cannot perform them, but as a result of the sexual division of labour historically produced in capitalist processes, ascribing reproductive labour to the female sex categorised body and productive labour to the male sex categorised body (see Connell 1998; Connell 2005).

Because of the heteronormative order and relational nature of gender, ruling ways of knowing masculinity are always defined in 'contradistinction' to subordinated feminised masculinities and femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 848). Doing a particular form of global masculinity is subtly invoked in the excellence discourses of organisational and managerial texts at Aalto. Men and women have to invoke this discourse through forms of boasting if they are to be considered excellent. In contrast, doing femininity refers to work which is not rewarded or boastable. However, teaching, curriculum planning, student care and emotional work at the university and in the department, and the care duties in the home must also be performed. This is necessary in order for the institutional reality of the university strategy and ideal academic to become actionable for the few. The femininity discourses include a *caring* discourse that emphasises the importance of being locally oriented, rather than globally oriented, and available to fulfil family commitments, collegiality and emotional work in terms of providing encouragement, advice, comfort, support and help to solve tasks or ameliorating workload burdens. Furthermore, it involves ensuring that student learning is maximised, by expending considerable time and effort in preparing classes and delivering feedback.

Both men and women at Aalto engaged in performing these masculinities and femininities. Performing masculinity and femininity is part of the local work involved in positioning oneself relative to the 'ideal academic', i.e. part of the local work that must be performed to be considered competent. My study did not suggested that both men and women would engage in doing masculinity and femininity, but that gender stereotypes required a lot of balancing work, particularly by women (see also Rudman 2008). In certain departments, particularly within the school of sciences and technology, a competitive, self-confident and successful woman would still

risk being pushed aside and perhaps even punished for performing global masculinity (see also Katila & Erikson 2013). This is illustrated in the following interview quote:

> **Maarit**: a woman who is outspoken is the worst thing in [a] community dominated by men uhm because you are a threat if you are a little bit too crazy [ambitious] and a woman […] I suggested that I could be the deputy head […] because its fair…not because I am a woman […] and it was a *major issue* […]

On the other hand caring for students and academic housekeeping did not benefit women in competence evaluations, because it would be attached in a taken-for-granted manner to the sex-categorized female body, and therefore treated as 'natural' (Adkins 2004).

At the school of art, and in certain departments within the school of business, the case was somewhat different. Here the tendency to accept standardised criteria, evaluation forms and textual documentation of merits as neutral and objective signs of competence functioned to legitimise female academics' engagement in boasting because it downplayed the masculine discourses attached to it. Women who had reached tenure track positions in these fields tended to emphasise how they felt very equal in their environment. Aggressive global masculinity can, thus, be appropriated and used as a resource by particular types of women who are privileged in relation to the standardised criteria of excellence; while it becomes a practice that awakens anxiety for those who do not. However, gender relations do not explain why some feel entitled to flag their individual merits, while others do not. In what follows I therefore explore how the practice of boasting is tied to the balancing of particular middleclass codes of communication, sense of entitlement and the ability to avoid disposability through the flexible and speedy appropriation of new practices.

**Boasting and Cultural Middleclass Finnishness**

> Class inequalities involve differences in *access* to valued circumstances, practices and ways of life – 'goods' in the broad sense – and in the *recognition* or *valuation* of those goods and their holders. They produce and are shaped in struggles and competition, domination and resistance, as well as compliance, whether willing or reluctant. (Sayer 2005, 95).

Finnish universities, particularly in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, have since Finland's independence from Russia in 1917 been defined by *cultural middleclass* notions of respectability and progressive egalitarian sentiments (see Käyhkö 2015; Roberts 1989; Carbourgh 2005; Marakowitz 1996, 1988). The free provision of education for men and women was considered significant for elevating Finland out of deep poverty, overcoming class conflict in favour of national unity and ensuring democratic participation (see Meriläinen et al 2012). The marketization of academia has challenged the taken-for-granted status and legitimacy of these values and purposes. It has involved the introduction of economic rationales and a pressure to provide research and education more flexibly aligned with the demands of the market. The 'ideal academic' is shaped in an by these changes, and the individualistic and competitive discourses related to its construction can historically be traced as arising in and around the activities of the *economic middleclass* (see also Tienari 2012).

Strategic texts in and around Aalto mediated classed ruling relations of 'Finnishness' and 'Finnish strengths', defined as 'hard work and perseverance', 'equality' and 'egalitarianism' in conjunction with a 'global outlook and mind-set.' These values were seen as crucial for Aalto to become 'world

class.’ The rhetoric of national identity and unity in the competitive environment of the global economy, of course, obscures socio-cultural differences and inequalities within Finland. It assumes the culturally particular constitutes a resource that can be converted to value by all who strive for excellence. The subtext to the flagging of Finnishness as competitive advantage is a neoliberal understanding of the individual as able to strategically manage herself to be competitive. Economic middleclass values in that way become subtly fore fronted. The textual definition of Finnishness is compatible with, although not identical to, the geocentric, careerist and networking features of the global masculinity discourse. While both the economic middleclass discourses and the global masculinity discourses refer explicitly to relations of power and hierarchy, and may intersect in complex ways, they do not, however, arise from identical historical processes and they produce different forms of privilege and inequality.

Engaging in everyday life at Aalto, and conversing with colleagues and friends I came to an understanding of Finnishness which accorded with cultural middleclass values and linguistic anthropologist Donald Carbourgh’s studies of Finnish academia:

> One should not invoke topics or themes that are contentious or conflictual (or more positively, one should keep present relations on a harmonious ground); One should be personally committed to or invested in what one says (Carbourgh 2005, 42).

My research participants emphasised direct[3], concise, substantive talk and the maintenance of harmonious relations.  Their perceptions of Finnish codes of communication were in opposition

[3] An expression of commitment and loyalty to a relationship, because you give other people a chance to change their behaviour and manner. Directness is not necessarily present in all relations.

and indicated resistance to the institutional language of boasting. Superlatives, niceties and flattering ones-self or others, was perceived as superficiality and exaggeration. A strong "code of modesty" was indicated and people would express discomfort in flagging difference and status which was perceived as generating conflict (Ljunggren 2017, 563). The expression of discomfort was, as in the case of Tuuli, however often followed by a contradictory statement. On the one hand, "under-communicating" success (see Daloz 2007), while on the other hand, expressing an individualistic entitlement to recognition as a result of diligent work (Ljunggren 2017, 565). They engaged in masculine boasting, because they felt entitled to do so, while making clear that they were acting in contradiction with their egalitarian values. (see Sayer 2005). Helena's anxiety resulting from the boasting practices of her colleagues was shaped in classed ruling relations, their sense of entitlement to be positioned as "ideal academics" and lacking understanding of those who did not feel entitled to engage in masculine boasting practices. Helena's experience would confirm her position as an "outsider within" – that is, someone who is working in an organization steeped in middleclass values, but who does not herself possess a middleclass habitus (see Mahony & Zmroczek 1997). Helena's concerns would become silenced in economic middleclass struggles to achieve legitimacy and the cultural middleclass struggle to resist their fading social position. Helena would not be able to keep up with culturally middleclassed would avoid disposability by quickly and flexibly appropriating new practices (Tyler 2015), such as that of boasting. Class relations, thus, explain how female academics were organised and positioned differently at Aalto.

The struggle between cultural and economic middleclass value-discourses became visible at the level of disciplinary communities. Some disciplinary circles held an explicitly negative view of

egalitarianism, considering it a destructive remnant of the Nordic (and Finnish) ‘Law of Jante’[4], calling instead for the right to explicitly celebrate and boast individual accomplishments. Drawing on cultural stereotypes, people in such circles would say ‘be less Finnish’, ‘The self-deprecating law of Jante makes Finland incapable of having its own Michael Jackson’, ‘be more like the Americans’. In other disciplinary circles, in particular the more established and explicitly critical ones, such as the one Tuuli was part of, they would be repulsed by boasting, saying that ‘they could not endure such language’, that by using such language they were compromising their own values, or that the explicit and unreflexive use of such language ‘was a sign of incompetence’ or ‘compensation for lack of scientific excellence.’ With these expressions, they established a hierarchy between themselves, the *true* academics, and the others, the *false* academics. The way in which one engaged in and reflected upon the boasting practice would signal which side of the middleclass value-divide one belonged to.

Further, the work of boasting (re)produced the hierarchical relations between older established departments/disciplines such as Arts, which historically recruited faculty and students from the cultural middleclasses, and younger less established departments. Boasting would be considered inappropriate in younger, less established, parvenu disciplines, like Entrepreneurship. The attempt to maintain the taken-for-granted legitimacy of cultural middleclass values and resist the economic and competitive discourses entering academia, would result in Finnishness taking a discriminatory shape within the university context; where only academics from certain long established disciplines would seem to have the cultural capital to boast in a way that would be legitimate.

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[4] The Law of Jante was formulated in the early 20th century and has played a central role in Nordic people’s self-understanding: You're not to think *you* are anything special.

Despite the institutional encouragement of boasting competent participation in everyday working life at Aalto involved knowing and speaking the cultural middleclass codes of communication and knowing *when* and *where* it would be appropriate to boast. Boasting can be a resource for increasing the value of people, units or schools who are already privileged by virtue of their speaking the cultural middleclass codes of communication and living up to the gendered standards of quality. Those people, units, schools, and so on, who do not approximate such codes and standards draw attention to their incompetence, and ultimately produce core-periphery relations of inequality (Meriläinen et al 2008).

Young academics and new academic units with little or no established reputation, major theoretical contributions or history, may face barriers to being considered legitimate boasters. In contrast, those who are academically established and already working in accordance with the standardised measures of quality may not need to engage in equally loud or aggressive boasting and may engage in more subtle and acceptable forms of boasting. The work of boasting is both criticized as practice and embraced as something that engenders self-confidence; if only by those who can turn it to a resource for increasing their value.

> **Tuuli:** …if you are looking at the weekly newsletters …there are these articles "these are the people who have published in the right places" …*I even found myself there* …which was quite absurd […] *Oh my God one of these articles again…*and then I clicked on the link and I noticed *Oh I am there* […] when you *meet* the standards you actually *feel* good […] it is sort of *seducing* …but it first became clear to me at a later stage

Simultaneously embracing and distancing oneself from the practice of boasting can be perceived as a form of counter-identification in relating to the managerial and economic discourses (see e.g.

Holmer-Nadesan 1996). This would signal a “rejection of the formal designations of organizational identity”, and the self-promoting boasting practices around it; but it also implicates a “form of complicity.” Counter-identification is characterised by a showing “sensitivity towards the contradictions and antagonisms” in the institutional representations and practices; but not combining that sensitivity with clear resistance (Holmer-Nadasan 1996, 58). In the case of Tuuli, the initial counter-identification turned to dis-identification and clear resistance at a later stage. But for many others this was not the case; they disliked the excellence discourse and the practice of boasting, but did not identify any clear alternative to it. It marks, in the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu (1999), a “divided habitus” mediated through a conflict between diverging middleclass values and discourse: between those who wish to treat the academic endeavour as an end in itself and those who seek competitive advantage (see Aarseth 2017; Ljunggren 2017). The art for them became one of displaying the activity of boasting as not being empty or instrumental, but an expression of one’s authentic dedication to academic work.

The standardised textual evaluation measures supplement an already individualised conception of success. They provide a measure of who can legitimately engage in, and use, boasting as a resource, and who can legitimately engage in any critique of the textual evaluation measures. Every so often I would hear remarks from colleagues about academic articles critical of bibliometrics and journal ranking lists, similar to the following: ‘…Yeah, well that person hasn’t even published in those journals himself, so he is probably just suffering from an inferiority complex’. As Tuuli put it, ‘the seduction of managerialist measures’ was at work; people reproduced them even when they were against their values and operating against their own best interest.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article I have analysed the textually coordinated and institutionally encouraged work of boasting as one element in making actionable the institutional intention of becoming ‘world class.’ While boasting is not a new phenomenon in academia, a characteristic of boasting in contemporary academia is the way in which it is openly encouraged and how it is socially organised in terms of *what* one boasts about, *how* one boasts and ultimately *whom* can legitimately engage in and use boasting as a resource to further their position. The institutional and organisational encouragement of boasting (e.g. through forums such as “High 5”, Newsletters portraying successful publications, awards at annual parties) works in conjunction with the individualisation of success and responsibility, and the downplaying of structural, social, organisational and institutional reasons for failure to live up to standardised quality criteria. Despite the claim that boasting is a resource that is equally available to all who have merits to boast about, I have showed how boasting is shaped and organised in ruling relations of gender and class. I unpacked gendered and classed social relations as they are shaped in a complex material and relational dynamic between translocal institutions, on the one hand, and everyday experience, on the other hand. In doing so, the social relations of e.g. global masculinity and middleclass Finnishness can be seen as complexly interacting in explaining how the practice of boasting points towards the (re)production of inequalities between men and women, but also between women and women and men and men. Taking this interaction seriously has not, however, involved reducing class and gender to ways of “doing difference” (see Smith 2009), but highlighting how class and gender relations originate in different histories and processes of legitimization (e.g. Squires 2008). They operate differently at the local and the translocal level, and allow for diverging degrees of resistance. By taking the standpoint of junior female academics, I have explicated the complex workings of gender and class relations at the level of everyday experience and organization. Firstly, men are, as a result of

gendered divisions of labour within and outside the university, better positioned to succeed on standardised measures of quality i.e. achieving the things one should boast about. It is taken for granted that women will do the caring and academic housekeeping that do not qualify for boasting. Moreover, even when women do meet the university standards for quality, they face the double bind shaping *how* their boasting should and can be performed. Doing excellence and the required boasting involves performing global masculinity. But due to expectations placed on women to do femininity, a woman may not benefit from boasting, but rather be punished for it. Therefore, she must make additional effort to strike a careful balance between the two – a difficult task, bordering on impossible. This is particularly the case in certain schools and disciplines that are dominated by men and masculine orders.

In other disciplines and schools, the dominant assumed notion that the standardised measures of quality are neutral and objective, means that to the extent a woman attains or exceeds the standards, she may not be faced with the problem of the double bind. In that way boasting can be used as a resource by women who are already privileged within the institution, while reproducing the marginalised position of those who are not. However, gender relations, do not by themselves explain why some people feel entitled to boast, despite disliking it, while others do not. It does not explain why someone, despite counter-identifying with the "ideal academic" and the boasting practices, still manages to avoid being made disposable, while others do not. To understand this I engaged with explicating how experiences of junior female academics were shaped in relations of class, the balancing of particular Finnish middleclass codes of communication and the ability to avoid disposability through the flexible and speedy appropriation of neoliberal practices.

Within the organizational documents of Aalto, *being Finnish* and *Finnishness* is presented as though its definition was not produced in particular socio-political and classed struggles. Defining

Finnishness as “hard work and perseverance” and “egalitarianism”, considering it a resource equally available to all to boast about, and arguing that it would provide Aalto with a competitive edge, involves downplaying the cultural characteristics that were identified by my research participants as matching rather poorly with boasting. In unpacking this I explored how the internal fractions of the middleclass – the economic and the cultural – engaged in discursive struggles to achieve legitimacy on the one hand, and maintain legitimacy and social status on the other. Despite the discourses and practices of the economic middleclass/financial elite winning ground in academia, the cultural middleclass and their “egalitarian elitism” continues to shape *how* and *when* boasting can be carried out and *who* increases their value when boasting. In fact, boasting may if not undertaken carefully, be regarded as a sign of incompetence, reproducing hierarchical orders in academia at the level of individuals and disciplines. The need for careful consideration and knowledge of how and when boasting is appropriate is significant, as it remains important to position the practice and oneself as driven by authentic concerns for knowledge and academic work, rather than by strategic or instrumental concerns for competitive advantage. Boasting, if it is to be converted to value for the academic or the department, should be accompanied by an ironic distancing from competitive neoliberalism, managerialism and ‘selling oneself.’ From the standpoint of those who do not feel entitled to boast and who have not appropriated the practice, the elitist egalitarianism of the cultural middleclass is not very helpful. Their experiences of anxiety were silenced in middleclass discursive struggles for legitimacy.

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