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## Experiences of arbitrary management among Finnish academics in an era of academic capitalism

Tiina Nikkola <sup>a</sup> and Tuomas Tervasmäki <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

### ABSTRACT

For the last two decades, Finnish universities have faced the implementation of new systems of control and undergone dramatic changes that have worsened academic working conditions – such as corporatisation and budget cuts. This article explores Finnish academics' experiences of university reforms with a special focus on the consequences it has had in terms of organisational socio-dynamics. We adapt Glynos and Howarth's logics of critical explanation and apply this theoretical framework to analyse the interviews of academics who, against their own will, did not have their contracts renewed. This approach describes, explains, and criticises the logics – which are social, political and fantasmatic – behind the existence, continuation, and transformation of practices that are very real. Our research findings suggest that there are situations in which experiences of opaque management may occur at university. Academics often found the decision-making processes to be unpredictable and ambiguous, leading to a precarious working atmosphere. Combining the logics approach with micro-level data analysis, we developed the concept of arbitrary management, offering new perspectives for understanding the mediation between social practices and structural reforms. This micro-political analysis provides a new take on how ideologies operate at university in an era of academic capitalism.

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### Recent changes in Finnish higher education

For three decades there has been a global trend in education policy to reform education systems along managerial and entrepreneurial lines (Olssen and Peters 2005; Ball 2012, 11; Mundy et al. 2016). The reforms have meant a shift away from the government *per se* towards a greater reliance on governance mechanisms such as accountability and transparency through monitoring, standards, and reporting (Bromley 2016; Teelken 2012). In the European level, the aims and results of these reforms in universities have varied in their intensity and extent (Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2017). For example, in England and the Netherlands, top-down evaluation procedures and hierarchical decision-making structures

**CONTACT** Tiina Nikkola  [tiina.nikkola@jyu.fi](mailto:tiina.nikkola@jyu.fi)  Faculty Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä 40014, Finland

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have been extensively deployed, whereas in France and Italy, new public management ideas have been applied in a weaker though still visible fashion (Seeber et al. 2015; Capano and Regini 2014). In Nordic countries, universities have also faced various accountability demands; national reforms have introduced new forms of evaluation, increased performance-based funding systems, and expanded managerial accountability mechanisms – which, especially in Denmark and Finland, have simultaneously made their internal organisation more hierarchical (Hansen et al. 2019).

These changes have blurred responsibilities between the public and private sectors and turned scientific knowledge into intellectual property that can be exchanged like any other commodity. Higher education has started to be seen, above all else, as the production of knowledge to facilitate economic competitiveness – rather than democracy, social welfare, or social planning. From the sociological perspective, this process of integrating with the new economy has been seen as a shift away from the Mertonian norms (public good knowledge/learning regime) of universalism, communalism, disinterestedness, and organised scepticism that previously held sway in academia, to a neoliberal ethos of what has been termed ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, 28–30; Slaughter and Cantwell 2012). Although past models were not unproblematic, class-driven establishment and professor-led distribution of power were characteristics for many European universities (e.g. Välimaa 2019).

Despite some differences (such as restrictions in the tuition fees, which are charged only from non-EU or non-European Economic Area citizens), Finnish higher education has not been an exception from the wider transformation, even though it has happened late as compared to USA (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014) or many other European countries (Cantwell and Kauppinen 2014). In a higher education system that has traditionally been public, the Universities Act (2009) in Finland paved the way towards privatisation, and the changes that followed have been rapid: universities have ceased to be state institutions, management has become centralised, and private funding has started, to name but a few of the repercussions (Välimaa 2012; Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014; Kallio et al. 2016; Sundell and Teivainen 2017). These reforms aim to increase the effectiveness of national higher education systems by getting them to compete globally (Nokkala and Välimaa 2017; Välimaa 2012), and now the university funding system in Finland is excessively performance-driven, as 75% of core state funding is now performance-based (Hansen et al. 2019; de Boer et al. 2015). Moreover, 70 % of Finnish academics work on a fixed-term basis (Sivista 2020). It has been argued that in Finnish higher education the academic capitalist regime coexists with the previous public good knowledge regime, and the discordance of these ideals can produce tensions and conflicts of interest in the level of university organisations (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014).

From the perspective of most university employees, the reforms have had a negative effect on their work culture. The possibilities for staff to participate in democratic decisions that affect them have been narrowed and, with the centralisation of management, the hierarchy and bureaucracy within the administrative culture has increased at the expense of academic well-being (Rinne and Jauhiainen 2012; OKM 2016, 76–79; Wennberg, Korhonen, and Koramo 2018). In a recent study, the majority of Finnish scholars agreed that the 2010 reforms had changed the ethos of academia from that of a Humboldtian collegium to a competitive market (Kallio et al. 2016).

And yet while these reforms have been taking place, academics remained surprisingly passive. During the law reforms, resistance took the form of critical condemnatory

articles, petitions, and a few demonstrations, but substantial resistance, such as strikes, did not happen. Sundell and Teivainen (2017) have argued that the latest university reforms were implemented using fuzzy argumentation strategies, which helped to prevent efficient resistance and facilitate marketisation processes in the Finnish higher education system. Despite vast research literature of higher education institutions, there are still only a few studies focusing on the socio-cultural organisation of academia under structural reforms (Ylijoki 2014). The objective of this article is to explore experiences of university reform from the perspective of Finnish academics whose working conditions have worsened. However, the results of this study are not limited to Finnish context because the recent reforms in national level reflect wider changes in the management rationale as the theory of academic capitalism suggests.

We use the logics of critical explanation (Glynos and Howarth 2007) as a framework for our analysis. This approach describes, explains, and criticises the existence, continuation, and transformation of concrete practices. Logics-framework offers a psychosocial perspective that emphasises the constitutive dynamics between subjectivity and social practices. Our research questions are (1) What kind of social logics characterize the organisational culture of university departments? (2) How are these logics being sustained by political and fantasmatic logics? (3) What kind of an impact do organisational logics have on the construction of academic identity?

In our analysis, we start from social logics – the logics of competition, atomisation, hierarchy and instrumentalisation – that Glynos and Howarth (2007, 171–172) identified in their macro-level analysis of the higher education in the United Kingdom. We apply these four social logics to test their ability to analyse micro-level ethnographic data in the Finnish context. Meanwhile, political and fantasmatic logics help us to explain how certain practices not only appear and become established but also what makes them desirable. Through this combination of logics approach and micro-level data, we developed the concept of arbitrary management which offers fresh viewpoints for understanding the mediation between social practices and structural reforms.

## The logics of critical explanation

The logics of critical explanation, proposed by Glynos and Howarth (2007), is a theoretical framework and problem-driven research method that is rooted in poststructuralism and postfoundationalism and influenced mainly by, among others, Laclau and Mouffe, as well as Lacan (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985]). In poststructuralism, the use of language and articulation is seen as a process of signification which, in itself, plays a major part in the construction of reality (Howarth 2010).

Postfoundationalism draws on Heidegger's questioning of foundations to metaphysics, such as universality and essence, whilst also refusing the possibility of final ground (Marchart 2007). From this perspective, the grounds for a metaphysical position are always partial and contingent. Because of this weakened ontological status, the logics approach places special emphasis on two ontological presuppositions. Firstly, all practices and regimes of practice are understood as *discursive entities*, where the articulation of meaning is ongoing. These practices provide a shared means of comprehending the world, and organise social relations accordingly, by creating subject positions for the

various actors involved to identify themselves by (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985], 91).

Secondly, there is the ‘ontology of lack’ premise that every system or structural network of social relations is marked by *radical contingency* or the instability of identity (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 109–110). Discursive practices aim to conceal radical contingency of the social by getting a grip of a subject by identification with particular norms and ideals (Glynos 2001). Ideological dimension of discourses deals with these ways the practices seek to construct the ‘normal’, hegemonic order (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 117–120; Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985]). This perspective enables us to demonstrate the essentially political nature of so-called social objectivity and its constructs – emphasising its unstable and historically contingent aspects (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 11). As ontology is emphasised in the theory, we focus on the practices’ categorical and existential preconditions that determine and regulate subjects (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 109).

Our framework employs three types of logic: social, political, and fantasmatic (Glynos and Howarth 2007). These function in different ways but when articulated together are key to explaining the existence, maintenance, and transformation of concrete practices. They are thus the basis for a ‘grammar of practice’ that describes how subjects understand their position and provide reasons for justifying what is considered normal practice (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 136; Glynos 2008).

*Social logics* look at the ‘patterning’ or ‘rules’ of social practices (Laclau 2005, 117; Glynos and Howarth 2007, 139). In this case, they describe the university department workplace and facilitate explanations of the social patterns that govern this particular practice (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 137–140). Glynos and Howarth (2007, 171–172) identified the four social logics of higher education audit regime in the UK.

- (1) The logics of competition, which describe how actors interact with each other as rivals, trying to maximise their share of the university’s resources.
- (2) The logics of atomisation, which are patterns of discursive articulation used to individuate institutions and persons as independent of each other, but at the same time isolating them from one another. Individual responsibility for one’s success or failure is accentuated by social and structural effects.
- (3) The logics of hierarchy, which describe how universities are increasingly dominated by top-down modes of governance, like a business.
- (4) The logics of instrumentalization, which disregard the intrinsic and processual qualities of teaching and research in favour of their instrumental exchange value.

The boundaries are blurred between various practices and the regimes they belong to, as these concepts should be understood as intersecting and overlapping (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 123–124).

*Political logics*, in the Laclauian sense, are concerned with the contestation and ‘radical institution’ of social relations. ‘Radical’ here means articulating the temporary grounds for these relations (Laclau 1994, 4). Political logics thus focus on the sociopolitical transformations which have made it possible for a particular social practice to come into being. They seek to capture the political dimension of social relations that would best explain the appearance, institution, naturalisation, and/or contestation of certain practices (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 141–143). Political logics operate in the spheres of

equivalence and difference (Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985], 115–117). In a political movement, the logics of equivalence work by articulating discursive elements, like different demands, values, and identities together in a ‘chain of equivalence’ and by uniting them against a deficiency or threat that is common to them all. In contrast, the logics of difference aim to weaken these chains by emphasising these differences – the classic practice of ‘divide and rule’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 141–144).

In university, for example, an explicit demand for *democratic decision-making against top-down management* might create a chain of equivalence among university personnel who believe that democratic practices are important in universities. At the same time, this attempt to create common interests can be derailed using the logics of difference, such as breeding doubt among the different member groups that these demands will only result in a pseudo-democracy, where certain academics, like professors, would actually have much more power than the other member groups. As a consequence, it can be argued that the current status quo, with top-down management, is fairer, as every individual is treated the same. In this respect, both these aspects of political logics can be used to either disrupt or preserve current social structures (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 106, 144–145).

In the same way that political logics explain how social logics are transformed, *fantasmatic logics* explain, in turn, why certain political logics will predominate. They reveal how specific practices may grip individuals ideologically (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 107, 145; Glynos 2008), so that they see themselves as subjects with a certain identity, and how this is reproduced by specific social practices (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 117). Certain discourses can become effective, if they can create emotional bonds – and it is precisely this affective dimension of discourse that logics approach take into account in order to explain the subject’s attachments to identities, groups and organisations (Cedeström and Spicer 2014). When considering this identity from the ‘ontology of lack’ perspective, fantasmatic logics ‘have a key role to play in “filling up” or “completing” the void in the subject and the structure of social relations by bringing about closure’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 146). It also hides the radical contingency of social relations through the articulation of beatific and horrific fantasy. Whereas beatific fantasy promises fulfilment of a desired action, the horrific promises an obstacle or threat to the subject’s identity that must be overcome before completeness can occur (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 146–147). In the previous example, the democratic movement could articulate a horrific vision of insatiable managers that cruelly demand more from the hard-working staff and provide a beatific fantasy of just workplace where each individual have possibilities to vote and have an effect on the organisation of work.

### **Micropolitical analysis of the data**

This study forms part of a wider research project by the corresponding author, called ‘the undercurrent of groups and communities’, where the intention has been to collect data on latent phenomena in working communities in one university. The institutional context of the study is a workplace unit from the field of humanities in a medium-large, multidisciplinary, and publicly funded Finnish university. The data collection was carried out in one Finnish university department during the academic year 2013–2014. Data collection took place after fundamental changes in the Finnish higher education system. In 2010, the new university funding scheme and intensified performance

management mechanisms were adopted with the renewal of the Universities Act in 2009 (Kallio et al. 2016). After the renewal minor modifications have supported the competitive audit-culture founded in 2009–2010 reform (Kallio, Kallio, and Blomberg 2020).

The study started with wider ethnographic observations focusing on determining those meaningful experiences which, if not neglected completely, are at least made to appear less important; and pinpointing why these may be difficult to take on board. The collection of data assumed that in working communities there are some things which are normally used to structure everyday life in an organisation which cannot be easily conveyed in everyday existence and via everyday language.

The corresponding author's ethnographic observations and interviews included both scientific and administrative personnel, and no one was consciously excluded. Interviews covered the following subjects: (i) the experiences of being left alone in a community; (ii) the experiences of middle managers; (iii) the experiences of not having one's contract renewed against one's will; and (iv) miscellaneous episodes of interest. Results from the first two of these subject areas have already been published in articles: the first characterised being left alone in a work community from the perspective of knowledge-workers who feel atomised and under pressure (Nikkola and Harni 2015); while the second shed light on the double binds of middle management (Nikkola and Harni 2018).

The analysis of this paper is based on three semi-structured individual interviews with academics whose contract of employment was not renewed, though they had not agreed to this (interviews iii). In these interviews, the academics were asked to talk about their career and the ending of the employment. Each interviewee was a native Finn (two female, one male), and a longstanding academic with 16–28 years of experience in research and teaching at the university.

The data were of a particular nature, because all participants had deeply personal, and sometimes traumatic experiences which they often expressed accompanied with strong emotions, like shame. The subject was thus a very sensitive one for the interviewees, and it was sometimes difficult for them to speak about their experiences, so much so that there were even some last-minute interview cancellations, and goes some way to explaining why all the data on this subject ended up coming from just three interviews. This made us treat the anonymity of the interviewees extremely carefully. The interviewees took part voluntarily in the research, and they read through our interpretations before publication, not only because of the personal nature of the subject but also to confirm that their identity and workplace were adequately anonymous.

There are situational and contextual factors, such as power relations, organizational norms and social positions, that will always affect an interview process and the nature of the data that comes from it (Schaefer and Alvesson 2020). In this study, we were aware that the interviewees' previous experiences, and the feelings that these aroused framed much of the way these three academics expressed themselves when interviewed. We also recognised that their personal needs and motives would affect how they spoke about past work-related themes insofar as they might have been aiming their speech at a third party, such as the managers of their faculty (Kenny and Gilmore 2014, 164–167). The interviews are thus not interpreted as 'factual' accounts of social life, but as subjective ones (Atkinson and Silverman 1997), where the interviewees construct themselves in terms of their position in the organisational discourse, from which they articulate their own perspective on the social dynamics and issues of the workplace (Frosh and Baraitser 2008; Clarke and Knights 2015).

The length and depth of sensitive interviews made it possible to shed light on the preconditions of action and how social practices take shape in organisations. Three employees' perspective of organisational practices is of course limited description and one might argue that these experiences of management procedures are unique to this specific department. Nevertheless, the data have implications for how managerialist tactics may be implemented – as has already been extensively reported in higher education institutions (e.g. Deem 1998; Ter Bogt and Scapens 2012; Slaughter and Cantwell 2012; Teelken 2012; Shore and Wright 2015). We also made a conscious decision to accentuate marginalised voices to develop a richer comprehension of how organisations (dys)function (Arnaud 2012). In sum, we argue that the outcomes of this paper are not necessary, but *possible* consequences of managerialistic reforms in universities.

The starting point of our analysis was to explore explanations for passivity and the lack of resistance among Finnish academics to university reforms that have worsened their working conditions. We ended up reflecting on the contradictory dynamics between individual employee experiences and the organisational structures themselves. With the help of case interviews, we bring forward into discussion those often hidden or poorly understood actions which function on the intersection of personally motivated and organisational action, that might have a crucial meaning to how academics react to changes in their work environment. The aim of this is 'to reactivate those options that were foreclosed during the emergence of a practice or policy – the clashes and forces which are repressed or defeated – in order to show how present practices rely upon exclusions that reveal the non-necessary character of existing social formations, and to explore the consequences and potential effects of such 'repressions' (Howarth 2010, 328–329).

We start our analysis by searching characteristics of four social logics identified by Glynos and Howarth (2007) from the interviews. Thus, we turn our analytical focus to the articulations that indicate a change in the organisation of workplace practices, and expressions that describe the ethos/characteristics of practices such as desired behaviour, identities, and stances. We also concentrate on discussions about possible contradictions, problems or issues that do not seem to fit the discourse. Moreover, we are particularly interested in those aspects which the logics of workplace practice fail to answer, and in the way these gaps and inconsistencies are treated (Cedeström and Spicer 2014; Lapping and Glynos 2018). Political and fantasmatic logics are analysed in relation to how social logics are being maintained. With political logics of equivalence and difference, we map out the political effects of prevalent practices. Fantasmatic logics and the concept of fantasy help us to examine what kind of narratives are used to support the status quo and academics' affective investments (meaning intense emotional reactions and attachments) towards them (Cedeström and Spicer 2014).

We present our findings in three parts. In the section *Opaque Management and Fuzzy Decision-Making*, we use the four social logics identified by Glynos and Howarth (2007) to explain our micro-level ethnographic data in the Finnish university context, while in the section entitled *The Tactics of Organisational Management*, we describe how social logics change when the organisation's practices meet open resistance from the academic. We also reflect on how organisational practices institutionalise the academic identity and social relations of a working community. In the last section of our results, *Arbitrary Management*, we summarise our findings and develop our theoretical contribution – the concept of arbitrary management, drawing on social, political and fantasmatic logics.



## Opaque management and fuzzy decision-making as outcomes of organisational logics

The introduction of the new Universities Act in 2010 and reforms that followed affected the interviewees' institution in similar ways to those that Slaughter and Cantwell (2012) have noted when moves towards the market in the USA and Europe: an increasing unevenness in academic disciplines, intensified competition between research groups over resources, and increased exposure to market failure led the university extend managerialism in order to protect its reputation.

Claudia Lapping (2013) suggests that such changes might offer higher education policymakers and managers a sense of control over otherwise complex research and teaching processes. These policies help them prove their accountability when having to deal with cuts to public expenditure. However, it has also produced anxieties in the lower levels of hierarchy, where academics are expected to conform with the new discursive practices (Lapping 2013), which in this case are the regulatory ideals of academic capitalism. The old model of the public good therefore persisted and the organisational culture was thus undergoing an ambiguous phase of transition when the events described in this article took place. The new personnel policies, for instance, had not yet settled in.

Our interviewees' experience was that economics became a priority in their workplace, that decision-making changed, and management became more unpredictable. Personnel described how it was becoming increasingly difficult, and in some cases even 'totally impossible' (Academic 2) to understand the basis on which decisions concerning their work had been made.

The new management culture in our department is a big question mark to me as it is to most of the employees. The earlier system had its deficiencies, but it was more open in many ways. And it was democratically constructed [...] The change in atmosphere I felt was certainly connected to the revised Universities Act and the tightening economic situation. The most common topic of discussion was the finances. (Academic 3)

In every interview, it was mentioned that the academics were not aware of what was required from them. For example, whereas the recruiting criteria for job positions had been presented in a very general manner, there were now very specific criteria introduced when deciding on the continuation of employment. At the same time, employees were also told they had chosen a wrong research topic, even though they had not been told beforehand what was required from them. The interviewees described various attempts to clarify their employer's *modus operandi*, but generally, the complexity surrounding decisions made was taken for granted as an unavoidable fact. Two of the academics did not even think they had the right to demand clarity about decisions made on matters that directly affected them. This articulation is partly contradictory when we reflect it to their yearning of the previous democratic regime. What might explain such a reaction is the general trust on the fairness of public institutions in Finland (Simola et al. 2017, 25–26). These two long-standing academics might have believed that their employment was secured. In sum, the interviewees speculated frequently about the changing demands of their employers. Interviewees experienced that the expectations and principles by which successful work was measured varied considerably, both over time and between individuals.

This lack of clarity is highlighted in the way the interviewees spoke about the continuation or termination of their contracts. It was impossible for them to know what was going to happen or why, and contract renewal remained their chief concern. In all cases where the contract had been terminated, for instance, the reason given was that their research interest was the ‘wrong kind’ (Academic 2). Academic 3 who had invested time in teaching duties felt it could have been used to advance their academic career instead. This negative way of framing teaching and research in relation to each other is one way that they have been instrumentalized in terms of their exchange value over the last few years. In this case, the criteria which affected the continuation of employment were not shared with the employee beforehand, highlighting the unpredictability of decisions made.

The ending of employment contracts came as a major surprise to experienced academics. In some cases, academics had asked about the continuation of their contract from executive members of the faculty and got misleading answers.

I assumed that, if my job had in some way been in danger, I would know about it beforehand. [...] So I asked our unit head, a professor in the same field, directly about the situation, and was informed that there was no problem, and that I had no need to worry. (Academic 2)

Actually before the bitter end, this academic had even taken part in discussions about the future, and plans were drawn up to implement this in the same university department. These discussions were conducted in an honest manner, so interviewees also talked about how, after a long career, it felt appropriate that they should be able to concentrate on their work without the frustrations of endless competition and the constant need to justify their existence. So it came as some surprise when they lost their jobs. The whole termination process was described as impersonal and lacking transparency.

The redundancy process aroused feelings of indignation among fellow employees. Among others, ‘immoral’ and ‘arbitrary’ were words used to describe the process. (Academic 3)

The way senior management communicated with those affected before the lay-offs was described as contradictory and insincere. According to the academics’, the information they had been given led them to believe that their work status was not threatened, as they had invested themselves heavily in their work. The assumption was that job stability was guaranteed by them having worked hard and well for a long time.

For over 10 years I had been encouraged to carry on working, at the university, in my own field. [...] Before my job was terminated I was writing an article on the future of our field. [...] It never crossed my mind, that my contract was going to be terminated. (Academic 2)

Academics felt that management decisions were also hard to fathom, and explanations given for not renewing contracts were not made clear at all.

So why was my contract not renewed? I have often wondered about that. Afterwards I think conversations with the head seemed to be covering up the real reasons. The real reasons remained hidden in the ‘executive team’. (Academic 3)

From the perspective of academics, the workplace management seems to be based on increasing the logics of hierarchy, fuzzy decision-making, and unpredictability. Similar top-down modes of governance are used in the UK and the Netherlands, where new

evaluation measurement mechanisms have led to more hierarchical and faceless management systems, arousing uncertainty and anxiety among the academic community (Ter Bogt and Scapens 2012). This puts the university worker in a position where debate and questioning, formerly an integral part of a good public university career (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004, 75–76), is no longer encouraged. Experienced workers seemed to have the most problems with this style of leadership, preferring the more open working culture that previously existed.

Competition is an integral part of any university job, but global competition, new performance management systems and fixed-term contracts have made this increasingly so, as excellence policies, finances and efficiency have become the focal point of university strategy (Välilmaa 2012; Naidoo 2018). Brøgger (2016) has argued that performance monitoring systems enforce competition by generating desire for fame and a fear of shame. Cuts are justified by a rhetoric of frugality and are directed at those who fail to reach new standards, so staff have to continuously prove that they are still suitable for the job they are currently doing. The interviewees described how their skills were no longer appreciated by their employers, and how the changing work environment showed that their skills were now surprisingly more appreciated in other universities than in their original location.

Because their unit only employed a few people as it was, Academic 2 had not thought there was any need to worry; thinking that any competition that did exist was from outside their unit – in terms of securing resources and thus its success against other units. Little did they think that there would be inside competition for academic positions as well. Interviews suggested that the logics of competition are the most effective tool of opaque management at the university because they justify this kind of leadership to the exclusion of all others. This emphasis on the need for individuals to compete over university resources is very much tied to the logics of atomisation, which isolates different departments and people within them, so that there is more of an individual than collective sense of responsibility for any successes or failures. As a consequence, focusing on anything greater than simply securing one's own position and building up one's own merits can become highly disadvantageous (Naidoo 2018). The tragedies that occur for individuals losing their jobs are not just personal, but for everyone in the workplace: existing defects and breaking points in it are highlighted, for example, by the precarious social practice of ceaselessly ending or renewing employment contracts.

## **The tactics of organisational management**

### ***From soft to strict tactics***

One way to understand organisational management is that it alternates tactics between proscribing and then accepting employees' actions. At certain moments it is very strict and demanding, at others it is more soft, concealed and flexible. In this section, we describe how these two are intertwined, and how the use of power is connected to ideologically preserving such practices within the organisation. Soft tactics are based on an ostensible agreement whereby the employer steers academic employees with new public management methods for example and the implicit exercise of power, or *governance* (Rose 2002, 16–17); while strict tactics are built on a top-down hierarchy and the

explicit exercise of power, or *disciplinary power* (Foucault 1977). These tactics are not mutually exclusive – indeed, they coexist – but the logics at play are better hidden by soft tactics than strict. Additionally, the logics’ features intensify when the strict tactics are being performed in the social practice.

When social logics operate efficiently, they conceal differences and disagreement in a ‘beatific fantasy’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147) where the workplace is portrayed as a unified and harmonious community. At the level of working practices, the partial consensus that results seems to be based on academics’ compliance with the unwritten conventions and shifting conditions of their work. From their perspective, adapting to this situation requires the belief, or at least hope, that the logic behind their employer’s decisions makes sense and is, to some extent, fair. Thus, by being flexible and compliant academics, they unwittingly become part of the beatific fantasy that the workplace is in fact harmonious.

Soft tactics reinforce the norms that are desirable in the workplace by gently steering personnel towards those aims, but no longer functions when the status quo is disturbed. This interruption occurs either due to some disagreement between people, or incompatibility between external demands (such as market trends, audit demands) and internal aims (such as those intrinsic to research and teaching, or related to *bildung* and critical thought). In our interview data, for example, Academic 1 first tried to clarify problematic issues within the working community, but this attempt was left unanswered. The interviewee then decided to give an interview for press media about the ambiguous management related to evaluation criteria and a lack of transparency in the academic workplace. Public disapproval thus threatened the university brand (Aula and Tienari 2011). The academic reflected over these actions in the interview:

I presumably caused [nuisance to some members] in the faculty, which at the university level is a sort of negative press, and then it was the case that I refused to fulfil the role of humble researcher or staff member [that faculty management expected]. (Academic 1)

In the above quote, the social logics of the workplace are being contested and their contingency made apparent. At this point actors in the work community can choose to act at least in two ways, either to ideologically strengthen the logics that strive to conceal the disagreement; or to ethically accept the radical contingency of social practices, and that norms may change in the face of disagreement (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 119–122). But these choices depend on the subject’s institutional identity and academic identity that can be opposed to each other (Lapping 2013). According to the interviewees, the disagreement was actively concealed by the prevailing logics. The following case recounts reactions to an episode where Academic 1 questioned the prevailing social logic and proposed other ways of dealing with the situation rather than passively accepting it. We describe the steps taken by the management to meet this resistance with increasing severity as follows: (i) setting limits; (ii) increasing strict tactics; (iii) cutting off communication; and (iv) stigmatisation.

The best indication in our research data of such steps being taken can be found in the manner in which the criteria for judging the academic’s work were changed only *after* it was handed in, at which point new, formerly unspoken, criteria came into play which had not been present at the time of writing. Consequently, grounds were created after the event and the work was rejected. Academic 1 did not accept this. In effect, the faculty was

engaging in the first of the above steps, by setting (unspoken) limits based on criticisms of the proposed changes given in the academic's evaluation – these were now given as the one reason why the working contract could not be renewed. At this point, stricter tactics were deployed and power wielded more visibly in terms of advice and direct warnings from the university lawyer and executive faculty member, both to the Academic 1 and their supervisor. The hierarchy of organisation became apparent to some extent also in the interview of Academic 2, who was promised a secure future employment by the head of department, but that was being countermanded by members of staff higher up. Indeed, Academic 1 described it being 'as if there was a big sledgehammer level hanging over us, and it remained unclear who was in charge'.

When step (ii) did not settle matters, the next phase was to gradually cut off communication, which meant that the academic was not encouraged to interact with management at higher levels. As a consequence, the academic began to feel marginalised from their workplace.

**Interviewer:** So did they tell you directly why your work contract wasn't renewed . . . that is, given some actual reasons?

**Academic 1:** No, nobody said a thing. [...] It was simply discontinued.

The last phase describes the academic feeling the effects of stigmatisation as gradually, not just higher management, but more and more everyday work colleagues spend less time with them, and they feel abandoned by working community.

[...] I asked from the head of the department if I could keep my current office and its' costs would be covered [by another faculty], but no – they wanted to get me out from the [faculty and discipline]. (Academic 1)

Strict and soft tactics have, respectively, individual and collective aspects and effects. With soft tactics, governance works through the community as a whole and employees on a general level. Strict tactics, however, concentrate more on the individual, who is identified as embodying undesirable behaviour, and they become more demanding and coercive. To begin with, the usage of power is based mainly on the unspoken norms of the community, but as soon as those rules are contested, the workplace structures of authority will carry out disciplinary actions that reveal their power. Previous cases give an example of how, in contemporary Finnish universities, old and new management paradigms might have become entangled. Both are present and in use, and their tactics are often put into practice without individual actors necessarily being aware of switches being made.

### ***The ideal worker and workplace***

An organisation's management practices and tactics seem to have a strong influence on individual experiences. All the interviewees described how uncertainty and the precariousness of their situation caused them long-term stress. When they eventually heard about the dismissal, strong emotions were expressed and tears were shed, for instance, in the head of department's office.

I fell apart at that point [when told the contract was terminated]. And it was very embarrassing to go back into my office, back to calm down. (Academic 2)

Having their contract terminated caused academics to fundamentally doubt their own professional expertise, even though afterwards they all acquired new, decent work positions, which were in most cases actually better than their previous positions. However, at the time of their dismissal, they were transformed into invisible people, shunned by colleagues, heads of the department, and collaboration partners.

I was scum, whose company was to be avoided. [...] Yes, I felt I was somehow dangerous, that it's not wise [for co-workers] to be seen with me; that it was more likely to work against them than do them any favours. (Academic 1)

At the end of their contract, academics who had not had it renewed felt very much on their own in an unwelcome and exhausting workplace. Academic 1 described it as being like a 'silent burial' and feeling like 'hazardous waste' or, as Lok and Willmott (2014) have described it, like the 'contaminated Other'. In these cases the individual academic felt as though they were being held fully responsible for problems that were being faced, in fact, by the whole department. The dismissals are understood as a personal failure both by those losing their jobs and their former colleagues.

After that [the executive manager] would try to avoid looking at me, and when we were both in the lobby at the same time s/he would make quite an effort to avoid coming into contact with me. (Academic 3)

This means the social, communal, and societal origins of the event are left unexplored. Although one interviewee explained how they rationally understood the ongoing power struggle in the workplace and how the dismissals were clearly a part of this, they still found the emotional load of the experience nightmarish.

It seems, especially in 'crises' such as these, that problems in the workplace have been laid at the feet of individuals, and aspects at the structural level downplayed. In the process, academics that do not conform are overruled and eventually sacrificed for the sake of unity and the community's self-image. We interpret this act of sacrifice as a collective defence mechanism that aspires to protect the workplace from dislocatory experiences which upset the prevailing logics of organisational management. When the individual is set apart from other colleagues like this, then the logics of equivalence are in use: the sacrificed individual is articulated as an abnormal who is in opposition to the community's discourse.

Although placing the 'failed individual' outside the workplace prevents the spread of nonconformist thinking and preserves a solid sense of community, this functionality, from the academics' perspective, is a result of opaque management. If Academic 1 had started to influence opinion, prevalent practices would have been questioned openly in the community, and the ideological foundations for policies – that were otherwise unintelligible to those outside management circles – would have been made visible.

The stigmatisation of individuals like this confirms the community's superficial idea of itself as a harmonious workplace and fantasmatic logics help to conceal the need to examine management logics in any greater detail. Indeed, the nonconformist academic becomes a part of the community's horrific fantasy as a threat to the community's sense of unity that must be overcome before they can reach full potential (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147). Exclusion of the individual might be a short-term solution, but it draws a simple discrete line between adequate and inadequate

behaviour, simplifying matters and suppressing ethical and reformative alternatives which might, in the long term, actually be beneficial to the organisation's sense of community as a whole. In this way, management is not held adequately accountable and its ideological foundations are left untouched, while the stigmatised former employee must bear the burdens for a community in which acting cooperatively has actually become discouraged.

The cases we have described have presumably affected former colleagues' perceptions of their workplace, even though the study had focused foremost on those academics who lost their jobs. The social logics of practice seem to vindicate the entrepreneurial academic, whose main concern was to maximise their individual performance in competition against rivals within, as well as outside, their workplace. Academics were being atomised into isolated individuals and cooperation appeared more risky than before. The logics of difference operated within the social logics of competition and atomisation by cutting the chains between individual academics and preventing the construction of common solidarity. Moreover, any questioning of the meaningfulness of this practice seemed to attract disciplinary measures, reactivate the logics of equivalence, and lead to the eventual horrific fantasm of stigmatisation. As a consequence, academics would become afraid for their own positions and any articulation of collective resistance was jeopardised, as organisational practices excluded this.

In competition-ridden and precarious contexts, a neurotic atmosphere fuelled by fear and uncertainty can take form (Kersten 2007; Loveday 2018; Naidoo 2018). This uncertainty is, in itself, a powerful alienating force that lessens the appeal of cooperating towards common aims, and it becomes far easier to project threats onto the alienated other in such a climate (Bauman 2000, 148, 176–177).

In this way, social and structural problems are being translated into individual concerns. Because the combined shame of redundancy, lack of empathy from the management, and passive response of colleagues cannot be shared, the individual's reactions to this alienation are also seen as their own responsibility. The perspective of organisational dynamics is thus ignored and the individual must bear the full brunt of their own failure. Unemployment is seen by them as a symptom of this inadequacy, as they look for reasons as to why rivals, in this case fellow academics, have succeeded where they have failed. This would explain our interviewees' consternation, believing they 'had done everything correctly' after long successful careers and dedicated enthusiasm for their work. In fact, the professional identities available to them are caught between the 'rock' of being defined too narrowly, and 'a hard place' of constant upheaval (Ylijoki and Ursin 2013). Working life becomes a struggle for survival, whatever the level of a person's academic career, and the priority is securing one's own individual position and status, so the workplace's rules become defined by the needs of individuals and their will to survive (Alvesson and Spicer 2016).

The academics' accounts of management given here outline such an atmosphere – one in which the model individual worker is atomised, and employees' identities are quite strictly delineated. When a contract is up for renewal, the criteria for the ideal worker are made visible. Rather than criticise administrative decisions at this stage, competing individuals feel obliged to instead adhere to requirements that should ensure their survival. Academics felt that they must keep their critical thought (very literally) on just 'an academic level'; while in terms of practice be ever ready to be flexible and

productive, adapting to whatever is on the agenda that day. Individuals are encouraged to continuously evaluate their identity (Ylijoki and Ursin 2013) rather than their work practices. The logics of difference play an essential role in enforcing and maintaining these practices by scattering the articulation of common signifiers, thus preventing the construction of significant resistance.

The most crucial aspect of all this, however, is a lack of transparency in the workplace. From the point of interviewees, these opaque managerial tactics were not being openly articulated, clearly defined, or even consciously recognised. Any sense of professional autonomy was thus illusory and decision-making was perceived as impulsive. Eventually, working at the university seems to have become like a game where the rules changed depending on each individual manager, making it impossible to make long-term predictions about the future (Berardi and Virtanen 2010). Next, we summarise our findings and develop a concept of arbitrary management relating to a logics approach and the theoretical background.

### **Arbitrary management**

From the perspective of the interviewees, workplace management seemed to have arbitrary elements, because the decision-making seemed to be unpredictable, fuzzy and irrational – as we explained in the first results section. These findings have an interesting connection with a previous study in the same research project (Nikkola and Harni 2018), in which representatives of the middle management (head of the department, research manager, etc.) were interviewed. The managers had a collective belief that embracing uncertainty will lead towards progressive change even though they did not exactly know what they were looking for in reforming workplace practices. The idea of continuously moving forward and maintaining a positive attitude towards the change in general was more important to the managers (Nikkola and Harni 2018). We do not mean that the managers were aiming at extending their own power at the expense of academics, but the mixture of these elements may have created unpredictable social practices as a capricious side effect. For that reason management of this workplace felt arbitrary from the employees' point of view.

By 'arbitrary' we mean Philip Pettit's (1997) conceptualisation of arbitrary power. For him this means interfering and affecting the choices and situations of others on an 'as and when' basis – with no relation to any other criteria than those held by the individual in power. As Pettit puts it, holders of arbitrary power can 'practice interference at will and with impunity: they do not have to seek anyone's leave and they do not have to incur any scrutiny or penalty' (Pettit 1997, 22). Such a relationship can occur within the workplace, for example, if the employer 'can fire his employees as whim inclines him and hardly suffer embarrassment for doing so' (Pettit 1997, 57). The workers affected thus need to live in a vulnerable and uncertain situation, where raising a complaint is heavily disadvantageous (Pettit 1997, 5).

In the first results section, academics' accounts of organisational practices described management using all four social logics, simultaneously revealing important aspects of the logics of competition and atomisation that frame them. There is nothing arbitrary in social logics as separate logics, but when they are concurrently functioning in an environment where the implementation of new ideas is occurring alongside old ones



that are still partly in use, a transitional space opens up which is vulnerable to arbitrary practices. As Kauppinen and Kaidesoja (2014, 35) state ‘the demands experienced by academic workers have become increasingly contradictory because of the numerous university reforms that produced the partial shift towards academic capitalism in Finnish universities’.

The second account of organisational management tactics as perceived by academics shows how social, political, and fantasmatic logics can operate in the working environment of a university. Individual experiences of marginalisation, personal failure, and stigmatization reveal practices which treat university workers as individuals whose primary concern is (and should be) to pursue personal success, while downplaying social and structural factors such as power relations. Our analysis shows how these logics operate, and the political consequences of this to the identity, autonomy, and inclusion of academics.

With all this in mind, we can elaborate further on the concept of arbitrary management: it is a dynamic assemblage of social logics, mediated through a diverse range of political tactics and fantasmatic narratives. We argue that arbitrariness becomes possible when an organisation is experiencing transition, as this is when it is hard for practices to be clearly determined. Even though this is an example of experiences of arbitrary management appearing in a specific workplace and under particular socio-historical conditions, we suggest that similar experiences among academics might arise in other organisations where two opposing regimes overlap and where the ideological dimension of social relations is being accentuated.

## Conclusion

The application of a logics approach to the analysis of micro-level data enabled us to clarify some of the latent rules governing workplace practices. Through the concepts of political and fantasmatic logics, we were able to make sense of how these norms and practices are just one way of organising social relations and that current practice was thus excluding and suppressing alternatives. Political logics revealed how already, in anticipation of this, some options are being blocked. The logics of competition were repeatedly present in the interviews; when the struggle for survival is seen as the effort of individuals rather than of a community, there will be no effective common resistance. In this way management practices are seen to be keeping attention away from the alternative logics behind the actions being taken.

The results of our micro-level study illustrate and deepen the findings from a recent impact evaluation of the Finnish higher education reforms which shows that reforms have changed the leadership and operating culture considerably, created uncertainty, and staff have become less involved in decision-making (Wennberg, Korhonen, and Koramo 2018). These results tallies also with those from different European contexts (e.g. Teelken 2012; Seeber et al. 2015; Hansen et al. 2019).

According to the interviews, academics’ influence over decisions concerning their work seemed to be minimal: experienced academics lost their job with little forewarning and given ambiguous explanations as to why this had happened. The decision-making was characterised as impersonal, and academics experienced that arbitrary management was being practised across the workplace. These characterisations prompt us to wonder

whether there are specific circumstances where the management individuals in question feel it is better to pick and choose according to short-term needs and feel no imperative to appear consistent. It is important to note that this account is not comprehensive, since it relies on the interviews of three academics. However, their narratives give insights into the consequences of managerial reforms that regularly are left unexplored. Arbitrariness is nonetheless an interesting and context-dependent result that cannot be explained solely by the four social logics that Glynos and Howarth (2007) macro-level analysis offers.

Our study would suggest that these tensions and inconsistencies are manifestations of new situations in the Finnish universities where the traditional Humboldtian model of knowledge as a public good is simultaneously present with the neoliberal approach of academic capitalism (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014). The declared aim of the new policy regime is to create greater transparency, measurability and organisational effectiveness, but in practice, the result can be quite the opposite to the perspective of academic employees – a form of management that appears in an irrational, arbitrary, and opaque manner. The noticed lack of transparency seems to be the exception when compared to the broad literature of management (e.g. Deem 1998; Bromley 2016), but in cases of major organizational transformation, controversial and unintended repercussions may arise (Krücken 2014). The ideal worker at the heart of academic capitalism is incompatible with Mertonian notions of education. Those who do not agree with the new emphases – on more frequent publications, for instance – might feel threatened with redundancy by the new work environment, as we have seen. The same process that has atomised the workplace turns them into a horrific fantasy of the failed academic. Each atomised employee is forced to prioritise their academic status, making it more difficult to cooperate and counteract these reforms at all levels of the organisation (Lok and Willmott 2014).

Competition, atomisation and logics of difference is thus at the heart of the matter. When problems at work and the means to resolve them are understood purely in terms of the individual, the work community as such can no longer function healthily, or at least in a way where common resolutions are achieved. When atomised individuals try to resist on their own, it is futile as any effective opposition would require collective action (thus common aims). As Bauman (2000, 161–163) has stated, these common aims have lost much of their meaning as collective action is seen as risky. Indeed, in an atomised workplace, individual costs may seem to outweigh the potential benefits (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 176). It is thus far more effective to put effort into one's own activities, where the rewards might seem less, but the odds more certain. Our results suggest that organisational reforms could provide an opportunity for implementing these ideas and shared perceptions of an academia based on 'enlightened' self-interest. Because the concept of arbitrary management provides explanations for both the experiences of academics recounted here and the organisational socio-dynamics of how such reforms are implemented, we propose that it is a concept which should be scrutinised further.

We suggest that also latent effects of organisation should be considered when the outcomes of university reforms are being assessed. If the cases described in this article had been considered from more of an ideological perspective, the incidents that now appear personal might finally be seen for what they are – as more political and socio-dynamic nature. Prevailing norms can be contested, but it requires a complex counter-hegemonic action (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 193–201). At the organisational level, the

ethical dimension of social practices could be put forward as an alternative to existing methods of management. This more ethical stance accepts that there will be failures, disagreements, and that norms of practice can and will change. Reflecting upon these issues requires democratic negotiation, and could be made a key objective for the workplace as it fosters a sense of community. This would make it easier to achieve common equivalence between university workers and make political demands against organisational and political structures that claim to work in the community's best interests.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Tiina Nikkola* (PhD) works as a university teacher at the Faculty of Education and Psychology at University of Jyväskylä. In recent research she has concentrated on working cultures, hidden questions of power within work communities and critical teacher education.

*Tuomas Tervasmäki* (M.A.Ed.) is a doctoral researcher in the Faculty of Education and Culture at the Tampere University. In his PhD research he analyses the politics of education and Finnish education policy from the perspective of political discourse theory. Tervasmäki's main areas of interest are the philosophy of education, curriculum studies, and the operation of ideology in educational institutions and practices.

## ORCID

Tiina Nikkola  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1216-8375>

Tuomas Tervasmäki  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2300-6451>

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