

Emotional distance, detachment, compassion and care: The affective milieu of academic management in the neoliberal university

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Abstract

Based on interviews with Finnish deans, this study examines the affective milieu of academia. The neoliberalisation process in universities has strengthened centralised leadership and increased the power of managers. Simultaneously, the market-driven competitive ethos has deepened the binary between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ at all levels of academia, giving rise to an affectively tense atmosphere. Due to their increased power, managers play a key role in shaping the affective milieu of academia. By using an affective-discursive approach, I analyse what kind of emotions deans rely on while constructing their relation to employees. This study traces three management discourses: strong, paternalistic and collegial. Together, these discourses with their affective orientations construct a polarised affective milieu. On the one hand, the deans’ affective relationships with employees embody gentleness, care and compassion; on the other hand, affective relationships manifest the inducement of guilt, sternness, conventionality, distance and detachment of employees. I argue that current neoliberal academia leaves little space for deans to demonstrate compassionate collegial management.

Keywords

affective-discursive approach, deans, emotions, management, neoliberalisation

Introduction

For some time, there has been a gradual shift to centralised leadership in higher education institutions, which has increased the power of managers in universities and limited collegial forms of governance (Meek et al., 2010). The increased organisational power of

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managers and the entrance of market ideology into universities have augmented managers' responsibility towards institutional survival (Loveday, 2021). Within these settings, managers are expected to practise strong leadership, to make bold decisions and to provide effective management regarding global competition (Ekman et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, the discussions surrounding the 'hidden injuries of neoliberal academia' (Gill, 2016), referring to the malaise, stress, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression and guilt of academics, have intensified. In neoliberalised academia, academic identities are dependent on their ability to meet dominant key performance indicators; the tendency has deepened the binary between 'winners' and 'losers' at all levels of academia, which further inflicts an affectively tense atmosphere (Burrows, 2012; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Within these conditions, leaders play key roles in relaying the rewards and punishments related to winner/loser positions (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Although the injurious effects of the neoliberalisation of universities on the psychophysical conditions of academics are already known, the affective relationship between academic managers and employees has remained an under-researched topic.

Regarding the strengthened power of managers and the affective sensitivity of academia, I am interested in the affective milieu: the day-to-day affective dynamics within socio-material settings in academia (Schuetze, 2021). The focus of my enquiry is what kind of affective milieu managers construct in academia. Drawing upon interviews with Finnish middle managers, my interest lies in the affective attachment and detachment, proximity and distance, and inclusion and exclusion to employees that managers produce discursively. To approach this topic, I address the following questions: What kind of emotions do the managers rely on while discussing the employees? How do managers position themselves and the employees through emotions?

Taking emotions as a focus of enquiry relates to the affective dynamics of governmentality and the new management approach, which has devoted increasing attention to the emotional dimensions of work life and the emotional disposition of employees (Tosoni & Cecchinato, 2018). In this process, management attempts to employ techniques to target and expand the affective lives of employees in order to increase their productivity and manageability in the new market environment (Foucault et al., 2007, pp. xvii–xviii). On a broader level, emotions have been seen to partake in relations of power and to be tightly connected to neoliberal processes (D'Aoust, 2014).

Many scholars have noted that new managerialism should not be regarded as a monolithic ideology, but that there are variations in the way in which managerialist trends manifest themselves in different academic contexts. A much-used conceptualisation to capture this variation is Trow's (1994) categorisation of 'soft' and 'hard' managerialism. Soft managerialism identifies ineffectiveness and implements the invention of rational mechanisms for the improvement of university performance with the explicit agreement and consent of all those involved. Hard managerialism involves the imposition of discourses and techniques of reward and punishment on employees, who are considered by managers to be untrustworthy and thus incapable of self-reform or change.

Whether the question is of 'hard' or 'soft' managerialism, much of the literature has established that although national governments have given an impetus for audit technologies, managers have also been proactive in generating and implementing them to monitor and quantify the productivity of workers (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Winter, 2009).

This has caused a ‘gulf’ or ‘identity schism’ between managers and the ‘managed’. Managed academics strive to defend and promote the accounts and values of their own professional identities and collegial practices, whereas managers, having internalised the values and working patterns of a corporate management system, bring about managerial practices into academia (Winter, 2009).

Clegg and McAuley (2005), however, have warned against reducing the discussion of management to twin discourses of managerialism and collegiality. This dualism tends to portray management in a negative light, whereas ‘old-time’ collegialism is narrated positively, although former academia was not disengaged from unequal, discriminative practices (Nash, 2019). Certainly, managers are not a homogeneous group, either. Previous studies have shown that some managers find that there is a schism between a hierarchical power-driven management framework and the traditional academic mindset, which causes tensions within management (Ylijoki, 2014). Morley’s and Crossouard’s (2016) study of women’s engagement with leadership showed women’s reluctance to hold leadership positions due to the competitiveness, aggression, impropriety and anxiety associated with them. In her analysis of female managers, Deem (1998) anticipates that feminist managers would have better opportunities to resist managerialism through feminist values and ‘soft’ management techniques, but it seems that with their people skills, women are more likely to make new managerial regimes more acceptable in academia. In particular, amid the constant resource shortage, managerialism becomes a tempting strategy to pursue (Deem, 1998). Managers are said to suffer from ‘survival anxiety’, which makes them rely on managerial imperatives even more rigorously to ensure their institution’s survival in cross-institutional competition (Loveday, 2021). These tensions imply that managers have little sway in fighting back against neoliberal standards.

The context of this study, Finland, provides an interesting case to analyse. Since being a latecomer in the ‘modernisation’ process, Finland has been very active in neoliberalising its higher education sector from 2000 onwards (Ylijoki, 2014). The transformations in Finland have thus been quite recent compared, for instance, to Anglophone countries, but today, Finland has one of the most competitive funding systems in the world (Kivistö et al., 2019). This has led to strong pressures on Finnish academics to meet the demands for entrepreneurship, efficiency and performance (Valero et al., 2019). Further, Finnish universities have had a long tradition of collegial decision-making based on the tripartite principle of professors, other staff and students jointly deciding on key issues in the representative bodies, but this has been eroded since legislative changes in 2010 that increased the power of university managers (Poutanen et al., 2022).

Before I present the results of my analysis – three management discourses and the affective milieu they produce – I will describe the affective approach and the analytical apparatus used in this study in detail.

Affective milieu of academia

Recent studies of neoliberalised academia have demonstrated ‘hidden injuries’ (Gill, 2016) and a ‘depressed affective scene’ (Burford, 2015, p. 778), according to which insecurity, anxiety and stress dominate academics’ experiences. In her study of UK academics, Loveday (2018) demonstrates how anxiety works as a ‘tactic’ of governance in

steering academics to become compliant with the norms and standards of neoliberalised academia. Anxiety also has an effect on responsabilising academics for their own performance (Loveday, 2018), and thereby inducing academics to adopt individualised forms of ethics. According to Gill and Donaghue (2016), attempts to improve the employees' malaise by the university organisation tend to induce individuals to exercise 'technologies of self' that individualise the problems, rather than change the structural and political factors. Reflecting on these findings, it is worthwhile to consider the extent to which deans, for their part, are complicit in producing this kind of affective climate. Although affects have their physical appearance, previous studies have demonstrated that emotions are also inseparably tied to the socio-material context. Thus, the perspective that highlights emotions as intrinsically tied to social discourses is relevant to this study. Therefore, my interest lies in what emotions *do*: how they construct the social order and relationship between managers and employees (Ahmed, 2014).

Following Wetherell (2012), I understand affects as cultural practices that are tightly intertwined with discursive meaning-making rather than psychological states. For Wetherell, affects are inseparable from the discursive context in which they are produced and made meaningful, which makes the separation between individual/emodied affects and cultural emotions unfeasible. Therefore, Wetherell (2012) makes no distinction between the terms 'emotion' and 'affect' and uses them interchangeably. As emotions make visible the relations between proximity and distance, affiliation and detachment, and inclusion and exclusion (Wetherell et al., 2015), the Wetherellian approach serves as a resource to analyse how managers and employees are placed in relation to each other. Furthermore, as emotions partake in the valorisation of certain subjective/emotional dispositions, the managers' accounts of employees provide clues about the way managers define preferred and unsuitable ways to embody academic subjectivity.

To capture the affective entity formed by deans with their affects and different positionings, I apply Schuetze's concept of affective milieu. This concept refers to a material-discursive ensemble that is orchestrated in compositions of particular affects (Schuetze, 2021). It develops, blocks, enforces and stabilises power relations that are manifested in a network of forces demonstrated by particular affective dynamics. As such, this concept shows the affective dynamics in which academics are immersed. Unlike Schuetze (2021), who considers that subjects, having the same position in social order, are similarly oriented into the socio-material settings, I suggest that subjects sharing the same position – deans in this case – may produce different, partly tensional, and conflicting affective orientations that together construct a certain kind of affective milieu within the prevailing neoliberal university settings.

The deans' emotions as a focus of enquiry

The data for this study consist of 13 interviews with deans and vice deans (one dean and one vice dean per faculty, except one faculty that included two vice deans) in the faculties of social sciences and humanities (SSH) in three Finnish research-intensive universities. Five of the participants were women, and eight were men. The data are part of the project 'Academic affects: Research strategies as emotional hotspots', in which we are especially interested in SSH fields that are experiencing challenging times, since

evaluation systems that measure social impact and research excellence disregard the relevance of SSH disciplines (Hicks et al., 2015). The project's data also include interviews with rectors and department heads, but for this study, I chose deans as an object of enquiry. The deans represent an interesting group to analyse, since they play a focal role in preparing and implementing strategic and organisational changes at the grassroots level (Kohtamäki, 2019). Furthermore, compared to department heads, they wield budgetary authority over the faculty and are closer to the top management but still closer to employees than rectors. There are some differences among universities, but in principle, in Finland, deans are responsible for the management and development of the faculty in accordance with university strategy. Deans are liable to the rector for the economy and the profitability of their unit. They also conduct the allocation of budget funding and fixed-term recruitment within the faculty (Koivukangas et al., 2020).

The interviewed deans were what Loveday (2021, p. 906) calls 'manager-academics', since they had worked in academic roles before becoming managers and did not attain their positions from outside the university. As deans are expected to conduct more professional management to enhance managerial control over academic staff, the image of an academic leader as manager has been diffused internationally (Arntzen, 2016). Therefore, I call deans managers rather than leaders.

The participants were contacted by email with details of the project and an interview agreement format. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via the virtual communications platform Zoom. The interview themes dealt with research strategies, their aims and implementation, and the emotions concerning the strategy process, as well as questions relating to human resource management and the interviewees' personal emotions regarding their role in the management position. Our interest was largely in research work. Therefore, the teaching and educational sides were only marginally present.

In Finland, where the research circles are small, the maintenance of anonymity is extremely important, especially when deans belong to an even smaller organisational elite and represent 'a public face' of the faculty (Acker, 2012, p. 420). This public and elite role became especially visible as a certain kind of caution. Before sharing what they considered sensitive, they sought to ensure: 'These interviewees are anonymous, right?' However, none of the deans requested to read the transcripts, which implies that they had confidence in this research. Further, my position as an insider, as a postdoctoral researcher, and, as such, a member of this small academic community, surely made the question of anonymity even more vital.

As an interviewer, I positioned myself as an academic of lower rank in relation to the interviewees. In some cases, this power relation showed in a maternal/paternal stance towards me, which was embodied in encouraging comments or career advice. Sometimes, the power relationship was established when the deans underlined their tight timetables or the major things, especially with regard to funding, they had done for the faculty (Loveday, 2021). As a lower-rank academic, I sometimes felt uneasy about the deans' accounts of the ideal employee, since I often found that I compared myself to these ideals. This setup certainly had an impact on the analysis. However, the reflections on the previous literature makes my analysis solid in the sense that the same kinds of observations have been made in other studies.

Following an abductive approach to data analysis, formed through the relationship between existing literature, theory, method and observation (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), I first selected all the interview extracts that involved descriptions regarding employees. The selected extracts were subjected to close reading to reveal any invocation of emotional cues towards employees. Affective-discursive reading focuses on culturally available forms of meaning-making, in which different emotions are ‘put to work’ (Wetherell et al., 2015, p. 62) to construct a certain kind of understanding of academia and academics. I observed the extracts as texts that, through the use of emotional language cues and rhetorical devices such as metaphors, vocabulary and framing (i.e. presenting the issue from a certain viewpoint), produce the manager–employee relationship.

The deans’ accounts were analysed with respect to their institutional status as managers, meaning that rather than being interested in the representations of their biography, I was interested in their accounts as ‘expert knowledge’ of their work as a dean (Loveday, 2021). Since the research setting did not include ethnographic observation of the deans in their work, I was not able to judge the extent to which their practices matched their philosophies. The individual deans might also use several discourses while they spoke, not one discourse exclusively. Thus, rather than accepting deans’ accounts at face value, the emphasis was more on ‘how’ things were said rather than ‘what’ was said.

Next, I present three management discourses: strong, paternalistic and collegial. I have named these discourses according to the adjective that best illustrates the affective relationship with the employees involved in each. In the following analysis, longer quotations are identified within the narrative, while shorter extracts are enclosed in quotation marks within the main text. The interview extracts were translated from Finnish into English by the author. In this article, I have assigned pseudonyms for the interviewees: Benjamin, Hans, Lena, Linda, Marianna, Matias, Max, Nina, Oliver, Paula, Robert, Robin and Sebastian. All identifiers were removed from the extracts so that the interviewees remain anonymous.

Strong management

This discourse contains affects that produce a Janus-faced affective orientation to the affective milieu. On the one hand, the deans rely on positivity, or positive ‘hype’ of excessive enthusiasm about the success of the faculty, which may be seen as a means to trigger employees to engage in the triumphant hunt of excellence. On the other hand, the articulations of the deans convey feelings of guilt and the act of rebuke that construct authoritarian management. Together, these contradictory emotions create a discourse that I call ‘strong management’. This discourse resembles ‘hard management’ (Trow, 1994), with its imposing procedures of sanctions and rewards on employees. Still, I chose to call this discourse ‘strong’ to illuminate the active and substantial role of the manager in relation to employees, both for better or worse, rather than call it ‘hard’, which directly associates with the ill-effects of managerialism.

In their accounts, the deans attach positive sensations to the university and the faculty, which are described as ‘a wonderful’ and ‘empowering’ place where ‘one can try out everything’ in order ‘to flourish’. The high-quality work of the faculty is emphasised, which becomes evident in Lena’s account:

Researcher: What makes this faculty an appealing place to work?

Lena: We probably have different notions about that, but I think that our faculty is an appealing place, since we are very good in our line of work. In our faculty, people do research that is nationally and internationally excellent, and we provide opportunities for people to do that [excellent] work.

First and foremost, Lena illustrates the success of the faculty while describing the attractiveness of her faculty as a place to work. Certainly, Lena expresses her own pride, but pride may as well be seen as an affective practice that acts to boost employees' ambitions by triggering their willingness to be part of this group of high-flyers. However, Lena's account resonates with a marketing speech in which she constructs the faculty's reputation as a very successful unit. This marketing of the faculty may be seen essential, especially since while recruiting: 'The faculty is looking for [a] potential researcher who has skills to produce, innovate, generate, write, and get funding: a kind of person who has suitable surplus value for big projects' (Max). Thus, with positivity, the faculty tries to attract scientists whose competency is defined as an underlying feature of the individual that leads to superior performance (Tosoni & Cecchinato, 2018).

Besides positivity, the opportunities given by the faculty to its employees are emphasised. When asked about the researchers who might experience being excluded from the strategic targets, Hans stresses the equality of opportunities that the strategic aims involve:

In my opinion, we reward more and more for success. The faculty does not do the selection of winners, but strives to ensure equal opportunities for all.

In Finland, obliged by the Ministry of Education and Culture, universities released their 10-year strategies at the beginning of 2020, which faculties will implement in their action plans. A previous study has revealed that SSH scholars in more precarious positions have found university-level strategies exclusive (Hokka et al., 2022). Here, Hans seemingly ignores the possible experiences of exclusion by pleading for equal opportunities. Hans's representation embodies the ideological rhetoric of the 'promise of equal opportunities', which, according to McRobbie (2007), is encompassed in 'the new meritocracy' manifesting the neoliberal ideals of the bliss of free competition. In the next excerpt, the rationale for equal opportunities is drawn even more emphatically from the neoliberal value base, as Hans says:

It is up to scholars how they use these opportunities. [. . .] Altogether, people are enabled, responsabilised, and left to flourish within the existing frames. It is crucial that people understand that they are responsible for their choices. It is not person-related; it is the general rule according to which everyone must live.

The reasoning is that the faculty gives a kind of 'starting package' for employees that equips every scholar with the same resources and possibilities as they participate in the competition. Thereafter, the responsibility for their success – and failure – is in the individual's own hands and depends on the individual's abilities. However, as Ylijoki (2021,

p. 100) reminds us, academics that are working on different contracts and with different funding resources are by no means entering a competition from the same baseline but have remarkably unequal starting points for career-building. This matter is clearly ignored in Hans's manifestation of equal opportunities. It is crucial that Hans's account hints that employees should be grateful for all the possibilities they are given by the faculty and the freedom to capitalise on them. This invitation to feel indebtedness to the faculty works as an effective inducement of guilt: if the individual scholar does not fit into the existing frames, or things otherwise do not work out well, it is the scholar's own fault, since the faculty has provided everything it can for the scholar.

The responsibility for their own success also extends to employees' work practices, as they are expected to embrace self-discipline to keep themselves fit for work. According to Benjamin, scholars ought to 'organize their time in such a way that they succeed and feel good without needing to kill themselves to work, but they are active enough'. Benjamin's account works to construct the figure of a responsabilised subject who, with the use of 'technologies of self', pursues individualised forms of ethics (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). This management discourse, with its affective practices, however, suggests one possible way of how responsabilisation is filtered into the affective milieu of academia: the positive sensations and promise of equal opportunities, together with inducing guilt, work as effective affective tools that induce individuals to absorb the idea of responsabilisation.

While describing their relationships with employees, the deans frequently use the passive voice in their narratives. Verb forms such as 'to be activated', 'to be responsabilised', 'to be involved in' or 'to be enthused' are frequently used. These characterisations obviously imply that some academics are not 'enough' (not active, not responsible or not enthusiastic enough) for current academia. Further, the narratives simultaneously involve the inverted features of preferred subjectivity. However, the passive formula also indicates that the subjects are governed from a distance. The distance works to strengthen the hierarchical relationship between the managers and the managed. Although the passive voice narrative does not explicitly refer to punishment of employees, implicitly subjects who are not willing or capable of fulfilling these features are represented as objects of action, but from a distance, without interpersonal contact with these subjects.

Conversely, punishment is very visible in the following extract, in which Hans illuminates the unwanted features of employees and the actions implemented towards them:

Researcher: Is there some kind of personality trait needed by scholars in academia?

Hans: The most important trait is that if you make a promise, you keep it. My researchers know that if you foul once, you are out. You won't get another chance. And fouling means that if the draft is not sent in the right form by the deadline, you are out. Another invitation won't come. And if there is no innovation and contribution to the process that does not work, does it? In my last project, about a dozen researchers were thrown out because, if one is not true to one's word, then there is no use being part of this game.

According to Hans, an absolute sense of duty is everything. If one breaks one's promise or does not follow the rules, 'there will be consequences', and punishment will follow. Here, the dean represents himself as the one who uses his highest authority in deciding the punishment for those who are considered fundamentally untrustworthy and incapable of self-reform or change (Trow, 1994). As everyone in the project *knows* the rules, the interviewee deploys intimidation as an affective practice to make the employees obedient. Then again, while the rules are well known, they are transparent and equally apply to all.

Apart from being responsible, active and obedient, it becomes evident that the preferred academic should also express enthusiasm, curiosity and passion. No one wants to work with 'the stick-squeezing scholar': a scholar who is deadly serious and dull. Instead, employees should show a joyful attitude towards their work. Positivity and enthusiasm may be seen to represent 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979) that scholars should embrace to be decent employees. This stress on positivity seemingly echoes a corporate organisational culture, which is fascinated by positive psychology and the power of positivity to enhance the performance of employees (Froman, 2010). However, in a situation in which 70% of academics work on short-term contracts and suffer from precarious working conditions, this call for positivity may seem somewhat brutal. The question that may be asked, then, is whether this call for positivity is for all, or does it solely concern the 'winners' who have succeeded in gaining an established position in academia?

The distancing from employees shows also in the way the deans respond to employees' ordeals. Deans often describe how they are not 'losing their sleep over the concerns of the employees' (Robin) or how they are annoyed when someone makes 'claims about some irrelevant things' (Benjamin). The following dialogue between Lena and me about the tenure-track positions shows the affective attachment to the organisation and, correspondingly, detachment from the employees:

- Lena: People widely criticise tenure-track positions, saying that they are very stressful. In my opinion, the fact is that if you attain a tenured position, then do your work well, and you'll make a living. People think that the university will not commit to them, but the recruitment of the tenure-track scholar is a vast investment for the organisation, so it would be more lamentable if that contract did not continue.
- Researcher: Precisely. Perhaps people are suffering from huge emotional stress to succeed in that position.
- Lena: I do not know why people feel that way, but maybe that's true.

This dialogue reveals how Lena does not seem to understand the individuals' emotional pressures to succeed and prove their academic worth (e.g. Sheffield & Muhlhauser, 2021) but instead considers the situation from the organisation's viewpoint. It is the organisation that would suffer if a contract was severed, since it has invested so much in the employee. The employees' feelings are represented as irrational, while the response to these feelings is pronounced rational: a simplified instruction to 'do one's work well'. Thus, the extract reveals the alignment to the organisation and its goals, and the affective distance to employees who are categorised as a resource or human capital for the organisation.

Paternalistic management

As stated earlier, previous studies have noted deans' sense of discomfort towards the power-driven management framework because of its perceived inappropriateness to the traditional academic mindset (Ylijoki, 2014). This discourse comes close to what Trow (1994) calls 'soft managerialism', which is not wholly incompatible with collegiality but recognises ineffectiveness and strives to improve university performance with rational mechanisms. At the affective level, this shows a schism among deans between two organisational values: managerial and traditional, collegial values. On the one hand, the deans express their indignation towards managerial values, and they show empathy towards employees in these tightened conditions. On the other hand, the implicit posture among the deans is that there is no way to escape neoliberal standards: the only rational thing to do is to comply with them. Furthermore, the deans position themselves as seniors, who, with their knowledge, advise scholars to simply deal with the current situation. With empathy and pronounced rationality, combined with deans' positioning as seniors, a coherent sense-making structure is formed that I call paternalistic discourse. This discourse permeates the data, which makes it a dominant discourse. This management discourse maintains 'everyday neoliberalism' (Cannizzo, 2018a), which further produces conventionality in the affective milieu of academia.

The indignation towards managerial values becomes apparent when the deans indicate their resentment towards the subject who 'uses the university as a platform to advance their own interests' (Linda). Such subjects ignore the common good of the academic community by disregarding the basic tasks of the faculty – teaching, supervising and administration – and focusing only on research. The prototype of this unfavourable employee is a careerist who is disloyal to the local university community, does not do their part in supporting its functioning, and is continually pursuing their own best interests to promote their career. To function, the faculty needs 'local workers', the altruistic employees who take care of the basic tasks of the faculty (Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017). In this respect, the careerist is associated with the features of selfishness and egoism.

The organisation's best also becomes evident when the deans discuss funding competition. The deans emphasise that if someone succeed in getting funding, it is a mutually beneficial situation. As Lena states, 'Here we understand that we do not compete with each other. If one succeeds, it benefits the whole faculty.' The funding competition then is framed by utilitarian values, stressing the total benefits gained from successful funding applications. In a similar way, the resource shortage is made a common matter and presented as a shared source of misery from which all faculty members suffer by announcing: 'we are in the same boat'. In one sense, this construction may be seen as a way to encourage employees to fight together against this common threat of resource shortage, but it also works to dispel internal competition within the faculty. As Linda says, 'We do not compete with each other, but their success is also my success.' In this way, competition logic is not questioned; it is only 'softened' by positive, utilitarian associations, which thereby makes employees more disposed towards a competitive system. According to Smyth (2017), citing Wood (2015, p. 77), the danger in 'yearning for financial well-being . . . be it individual, departmental or institutional', lies in its potential to become 'the predominant force driving academic practice'. It also seems that, here, the lament

for insufficient resources works as an affective practice to make employees compliant with competitive rules.

Still, the deans also express empathy towards academics' tribulations in the harsh competitive environment. The expressions are framed in a regretful tone, stating that the situation among scholars is 'very, very tough'. However, despite this empathy, on record, organisational demands seem to carry more weight than human factors. Earlier in the interview, Linda expressed sympathy towards the researchers, who have to meet the high demands. However, when asked about the extent to which these demands materialise in recruitment, Linda answers:

Surely, we value determined achievers. I would say that we don't use time to analyse a person's CV to find out the reason why they have published only one article in three years. We don't have these kinds of discussions. We only say that, well, they have only one publication in three years, and they are not competitive because the other candidate has seven articles. Sure, we have the freedom to interview [the less productive researcher] and to ask for explanation [for the low number of publications], but usually, we just pick out those who have the biggest output.

Linda acknowledges that the deans *could* choose to interview a researcher who has been less productive than the other, but competition rules rule, and the most productive scholar is chosen. As Benjamin says, 'if someone is truly competent, especially in producing third-level JUFO publications,¹ it is very hard to pass them over'. The underlying notion is that the dean cannot take the risk of choosing the less productive scholar, since the faculty must survive in the institutional competitive environment. Cannizzo (2018a) highlights everyday neoliberalism, in which neoliberal strategies have extended from the governmental level to the production of norms and discourses in academia within which everyday events are interpreted and enacted. In this discourse, the neoliberal ideals have clearly become part of everyday life, as, although deans would not fully agree with neoliberal rules, they still choose to act on them in their line of work.

While describing their own visions and predilections for the researcher ideal, the deans reproduce the caricature of the traditional academic (Ylijoki, 2013), who is deeply devoted to their topic by 'putting one's whole personality at stake in research work' and 'living through their research topic' (Max). The need to feel passion for the research work is emphasised since 'otherwise, you will not be able to do this work' (Lena). Further, academics are described as 'clever people' who are 'used to doing things well' (Benjamin). In this sense, the 'culture of authenticity' is reproduced, implicating the normative passion for academic labour, which, as Cannizzo (2018b) has emphasised, intermingles with the managerial ideals of excellence, productivity and efficiency.

This figure of the traditional academic encompasses the idea that academics should be flexible and persistent in relation to insecure circumstances, as evinced in Marianna's account:

If you always bounce back and forth, or if you are desperate when you have only a six-month contract, this is just the world where you have to tolerate it and believe in your expertise. It is distressing. I have gone down that road myself. I was twenty years a short-term worker, but

somehow, the next contract and next funding always came. Therefore, I am inclined to believe in the self-constructed expertise that is built on the things you are devoted to. You are incapable of doing this work without passion.

Insecurity is presented here as inherent to academic work and cannot be changed. Therefore, every academic must bear it by themselves. This affective obligation to withstand existing circumstances, again, persuades employees to be resilient and thus urges them to pursue individualised forms of ethics. Simultaneously, the exhortation to believe in one's passion involves a promise of reward if one is persistent enough. This representation evokes Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, which illustrates the ambivalence of the neoliberal promise of upward mobility. To attain higher social standing, individuals are committed to hard work, but in current meritocratic circumstances, hard work may necessarily never find its fulfilment. As the hard facts of the ratio between short-term and fixed-term contracts and the acceptance rate of funding applications show (Kallio & Kallio, 2023), stable career prospects are only possible for a select few. While showing empathy for the precarity of employees, but also pleading her own experience as a senior researcher who 'knows how things go' ('I have gone down that road myself'), the dean positions herself as a senior who cares for the employees but, with her expertise, instructs them to become inured to survival amid the extreme competition.

This discourse is ambivalent, since, with well-meaning encouragement and empathy, academics are persuaded to be compliant with the prevailing competition rules. In her study of feminist managers, Deem (1998) speculates that feminist women managers and their people skills in 'soft management' are utilised to make new managerial regimes more acceptable among academics. In this discourse, it seems that the 'softening' affective-discursive articulations work to make managerial regimes more palatable for academics.

Collegial management

If, in the previous discourse, the deans suffered from the schism between the two prevailing organisational values, here the schism lies between the organisational and personal values. In this discourse, the corporate values seem to be truly against the deans' personal ideals of academia and the academic community, which are shown in their negatively charged displays of emotion relating to the prevailing conditions. Here, the deans express care and compassion towards employees and position themselves as mentors in relation to employees. Therefore, I refer to this discourse as collegial management. This discourse occurs in the data only marginally but clearly represents a distinctive discourse. With its negatively charged affects, this discourse produces a depressed scene in the affective milieu of academia but simultaneously shows warmth and communality with its practices of care.

The deans express stark affective articulations about the afflictions that the employees must endure. Performance-oriented academia is illustrated as 'enslaving' and 'exhausting', making universities 'a cruel place for a scholar'. Robert states that career insecurity characterises the everyday lives of scholars. When asked how he feels about this, Robert says:

It is an open wound – this financial uncertainty and short-sightedness of career building; it is really tough. As a dean, it is a constant pain for me, since I know there is nothing I can do. The system works this way; all I can do is try to treat the side effects. The monster eats up its children little by little. I have five PhD students this year; two of them have funding, and three don't. It is awfully unfair, awfully unfair. People are induced to do research; it is said to be the best work in the world. They are tempted to come here and do doctoral theses, but after that, there is nothing for them.

According to Robert, the university may, at first, pretend to be the alma mater, the collegial cradle of thinking that tempts with its care and manifests the bliss of research work. Before long, it exposes its true face to trusting junior academics. Thus, here, the university organisation represents the cruel 'other' (Ahmed, 2014) that penetrates into the flesh and body of academics, causing a wound that never heals. In this study, the suffering and pain of the PhD students becomes also the dean's pain, embodying affective proximity to these students. Overall, academics are seen as victims of managerial universities. The monstrous power of the university organisation is portrayed by the frequent use of the metaphor 'machine', which illustrates the automatic and inhuman nature of the system whose functioning is in no one's hands, at least not in the hands of academics. The deans' suffering is caused by both the employees' suffering and their sense of powerlessness in the face of managerial rules.

Empathy towards employees is shown also when deans are asked to describe the prevailing image of the valued academic. The deans express their dismay at the expectations set for employees: 'The persons who are magnificent in all possible fields are valued. It is a horrible starting point' (Sebastian). Thus, the statement connotes that the demands that are required of the employees are far too high. Sebastian says he gives every PhD student a speech in which he warns them against entering into a career path in the university, 'Then, at least my conscience is clear. I am pessimistic about the common system.'

Performance indicators are also seen as harmful because they standardise academic ideals that reinforce exclusion in academia. The rationale in this discourse, by contrast, seems to be that universities should work as monasteries; once accepted into the community of scholars, people should be left to do their own thing as long as traditional rituals and duties are observed (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). Hence, when asked about performance demands amid which the employees have to live, the answer is: 'in my opinion, everyone can act in one's own strong area without needing to operate in any kind of discomfort zone' (Matias), stressing that people should be free to concentrate on the things they enjoy and are good at – not to force themselves to adhere to the given standards.

Deans in this discourse eschew any kind of implication of steering and top-down management and position themselves as colleagues or mentors who guide in troubled times (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). In the following extract, in which Linda describes the joint working session with the employees, collegiality emerges:

We have been developing joint teaching courses between different study programmes. [. . .] And people start to throw ideas around, like listen, 'I could teach project work methods', 'I could teach copyright matters', 'I could teach interaction skills in multi-professional work', and

so on. And a sort of flow arises when everyone starts to come up with ideas. This creates such a fantastic feeling. It is terribly stimulating.

The affects of enthusiasm and joy are beneath the surface of this teamwork. While speaking of 'we', Linda positions herself as part of the group, one colleague among others. Hereafter, however, reality strikes, and the feelings dissipate. Linda continues:

Our budget is in deficit, and we don't have enough money. We would need seven lecturers, but we only have money for three. When I go to sleep at night, my heart is pumping restlessly, and it is hard for me to fall asleep. I am pushed to make a decision and announce who will be the ones who are chosen to lector's position.

It becomes evident that, amid inspiring collegiality, Linda must take up her position as dean and pass on the harsh realities to the others. Linda describes the physical symptoms (difficulties getting to sleep, restless heartbeat) that she suffers due to the necessity to disappoint the employees and act against them and her own will. Thus, it seems that the power inherent in the dean's position interposes between Linda and the other academics, interferes with collegiality, and distances her from her colleagues. This affective dilemma, in which the interviewee finds herself, seems to carry the premise according to which being a dean and maintaining collegial relations are incompatible.

The dilemma between collegiality and position as dean becomes apparent in the extract below, in which Sebastian reflects on his willingness to continue in the dean's post:

If the post as a dean lasts too long, then one no longer knows the researchers' work and moves at a totally different level. Also, becoming cynical is extremely dangerous. The cynicism is a real danger, since, as a dean, one has to look at the employees' struggles for funding and how hard it is. This has an effect on one's own psyche. (Sebastian)

Sebastian indicates that compassion for employees may be totally lost if one stays too long as dean. Thus, being a dean is unbearable if one wants to keep close to other researchers, maintain collegiality, and keep oneself mentally healthy.

Altogether, this discourse constructs a depressed scene of pessimism, powerlessness and feelings of desolation on behalf of the employees. However, simultaneously, the deans take the employees' side and, as colleagues, defend them in the face of harsh circumstances.

Conclusion

In a frame of depressed academia, in which anxiety is both a symptom of the neoliberalisation of the academic sector and a way to govern academics (Burford, 2015; Loveday, 2018), it is necessary to examine the extent to which deans, for their part, are complicit in producing this kind of affective milieu. In this study, the presence of three management discourses seems to construct a tensional affective milieu that is strongly polarised: on the one hand, there is a gentle and collegial orientation that seems to be a trap in the neoliberalised structures. On the other hand, there is stern, inculpatory and conventional

orientation that produces distance and detachment in relation to employees and accomplishes managerial imperatives.

Strong management and paternalistic management both urge individuals to pursue individualised forms of ethics. With its affective-discursive cues, strong management gives rise to two-tier academia, in which there are preferred, 'good' academics who contrast with unproductive ones who are unsuited to academia. This affectively produced division is created to make the institution thrive. According to Tosoni and Cecchinato (2018, p. 297), 'in the New Management discourse it is always the organisation and its functional needs that prevail'. It is worthwhile to ask what this affective-discursive polarisation does to the individual academic's psyche, especially the one who has not obtained funding for some time, or who, for one reason or another, does not feel they are part of the group of achievers. In paternalistic management, normative passion for academic labour intermingled with the managerial ideals of productivity and excellence (Cannizzo, 2018b), by contrast, may raise doubts and anxiety among academics regarding whether they are 'true academics' suited to the academic profession or, rather only incompetent, unqualified and lazy. Regarding collegial management, while promoting the need to acknowledge different competencies and multiple ways of being an academic, it may be seen as producing a permissive and solidary orientation to affective milieu. However, its emotional cues also create hopelessness, declaring that pursuing research without the burden of performance expectations is impossible.

Altogether, it seems that neoliberalised academia sets a stage on which the deans' possibilities to perform along with collegial management is a cul-de-sac. In their study of the management discourse in Swedish policy documents, Ekman et al. (2018) state that the government expects academic managers to take their place in executive positions and pursue strong leadership to make universities thrive. Although Ekman et al.'s study was carried out in Sweden, these findings apply to many countries, not least Finland, which belongs to the same Nordic tradition as Sweden (Valero et al., 2019). Thus, strong management is certainly the kind that the Finnish government would promote. In this study, however, paternalistic management is the dominant discourse, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies, according to which, in many countries, the so-called hybrid model that incorporates new managerial trends with traditional academic principles is common (Meek et al., 2010). Nevertheless, in the face of resource shortages and the exhortation to perform strong management, I argue that the current neoliberal academia leaves little space for deans to demonstrate their compassionate side in management. This finding is in line with Morley's and Crossouard's study (2016), in which the toxicities associated with leadership in the neoliberalised academy made women academics reject leadership positions.

The centralised management is said to fragment collegiality. If collegiality is understood as promoting the idea of a community of experts in different fields with no higher authorities (Nash, 2019), then collegial management strives to defend this ideal of the 'company of equals' with affective proximity to employees, whereas strong management and paternalistic management discourses impose managerial imperatives. The literature, however, has warned against simplifying and valuing the dichotomy between collegiality and managerialism. From this angle, strong management could also be interpreted as constructing what Nash (2019) calls 'socialising bureaucracy', which treats people with

equal respect, separating what people do from who they are. The standardised rules make employees aware of the institutional culture of the faculty in the form of ‘how things are done around here’ (Nash, 2019, p. 187). Further, the emotional detachment inherent in strong management may also be seen to be filled with the deans’ own anxieties about survival, thus leading to their failing to hear the concerns of their staff (Loveday, 2021).

The chronic shortage of resources that has troubled universities in Western countries and national governments’ increasing interest in universities’ outcomes underlie the affective milieu in academia. In Finland, recent years have proven to be difficult times for universities, since public funding for research and education has constantly been under threat. This socio-material composition could be seen as a shared external threat to management discourses. However, as this study shows, these discourses deploy different affective-discursive orientations to respond to these circumstances. If the aim of strong management is to increase academics’ entrepreneurship by creating a milieu filled with possibilities and positive ‘hype’, paternalistic management, by contrast, persuades employees to do what is necessary and comply. Conversely, collegial management refuses to accept the situation, but the embodied pessimism indicates that there is not much that could be done to change the current situation. Thus, what is common to all three management discourses is that they all produce an affective milieu in which there seems to be no alternative to the market-driven university (Smyth, 2017). In general, the SSH disciplines that the deans of this study represent have suffered the most from budget cuts (Adsit et al., 2015). Thus, in future research, an examination of deans in other disciplines would present a more nuanced image of the affective milieu of academia, especially since different disciplinary cultures possess different values and norms (Becher, 1989).

As my focus was on affective-discursive meaning-making among deans, this study does not address what kind of management each dean exercises in practice, especially since each dean is not committed solely to one discourse but may draw upon multiple discourses. Furthermore, as this study shows the affective milieu the deans’ discourses construct, we do not know how employees actually feel. For instance, there are academics who experience pleasure in marketisation – the excitement of competing and exercising self-governance (Nash, 2019). Although there is already evidence of what the pressures to comply with neoliberal standards and succeed in the sweltering competitive environment do to the individual academic’s psyche (Burrows, 2012; Gill, 2016), further research is still needed to explore how the affective milieu works among employees.

What will the future of the affective milieu of academia show? An affective milieu is by no means static; as one dimension of it changes, the entity of the milieu changes accordingly (Schuetze, 2021). Subjects may respond creatively and generate affects that pattern the affective milieu in a unique way. Thus, a political element inherent in the affective milieu suggests that there is always space for surprising political action.

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Note

1. In Finland, the scientific relevance of publications is measured by the classification system Julkaisufoorumi (‘Publication Forum’), also known by the acronym JUFO. It is a three-level rating system, where level 3 represents the ‘top’, level 2 represents ‘leading’ and level 1 represents ‘basic’.

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