

An organisational autoethnography of learning to manage academic workplace bullying through micro-resistance and activism

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An organisational autoethnography of learning to manage academic workplace bullying through micro-resistance and activism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq**Sally Sambrook** 

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Abstract

This article is about voice – I use my voice to speak out, and hopefully be heard. I am talking about workplace bullying and humiliation in higher education, and particularly in a business school, that caused abject disengagement. I articulate my pitiful, painful story through autoethnography. In doing so, I contribute to both the writing differently movement and to the growing critique of higher education. In attempting to deal with workplace bullying, I draw on theories of silence/exit/voice, complaint and disappointment as well as micro-resistance and subtle activism. My purpose is to give voice to bullying and humiliation so others (especially managers) might understand what it feels like, to learn how to deal with it individually (especially those being bullied and humiliated) and to learn how collectively we might act to address it, through micro-resistance and subtle activism.

Keywords

Autoethnography, power, managerial decision-making, dialogue, engagement, managerial relationships, writing

Introduction

How do you learn to manage bullying when you have been happily engaged in your academic work for years? Tight (2023: 126) argues bullying is a major problem in higher education and defines academic bullying as ‘unpleasant behaviour . . . by an individual or group on another individual or group’, which can be ‘face-to-face or online, overt or covert, one-off or repetitive, and unintentional or deliberate’. In this article, I expose how bad managerial practices and the overarching shadow of the neoliberal university in the United Kingdom constituted what I *perceived* as workplace bullying and caused personal humiliation. I try to make sense (Rhodes, 2019) of this painful experience through the lens of personal engagement (Kahn, 1990), the concepts of silence, voice and exit (Hirschman, 1972; Kolarsak and Aldrich, 1980), and disappointment (Mitra et al., 2024),

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and particularly through theories of workplace bullying (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020) and activism (Kenny, 2021; Kjærgaard et al., 2024), recognising that organisational actions and employee responses are in continuous interaction. To achieve this, I offer an autoethnographic account, noting how the accumulation of small, unilateral managerial decisions can constitute workplace bullying and precipitate harrowing humiliation and catastrophic disengagement. As such, I contribute to the writing differently movement (Boncori, 2022; Gilmore et al., 2019; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2023; Kostera, 2022) and explore what I experienced as the brutal personal transition from a state of considerable engagement to abject disengagement, and how this was ‘managed’ by my (male) managers and myself, also a (female) manager, and how I learned to deal with this. In doing so, I also contribute to the critique of higher education (HE) and particularly neoliberal organisational changes, which instigate ‘dark side’ approaches (Ratle et al., 2020), and demonstrate their distressing personal consequences.

Higher education has become increasingly neoliberal (Foster, 2017), performative (Jones et al., 2020) and managerialist, with national performance measurements for research (the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF)), teaching (National Student Survey and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)) and the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF). McCann et al. (2020) note that these performance measurements, which they refer to as ‘targets and terror’ (Jones et al., 2020), are powerful mechanisms for the expansion of managerial power. Butler et al. (2017: 468) highlight ‘a marked intensification of academic labour in recent years, manifested in higher workloads, longer hours, precarious contracts and more invasive management control via key performance indicators’ which are deeply affecting the personal and professional lives of academic staff, ‘leading to increased stress, alienation, feelings of guilt and other negative emotions’. In this context, Kiriakos and Tienari (2018: 266) encourage us to ‘proclaim – if not always loudly – what is happening to us’. I write this autoethnography as a way of proclaiming what happened to me and ‘figuring out what to do’ (Ellis, 2007: 26) to try to construct some meaning in my academic life and learn from the pain. As a female scholar, I adopt a quiet feminist approach, positioning neoliberal academia as an example of toxic masculinity (Marshall, 2023). Through my initially silenced voice, I wish to speak out about workplace bullying, and be heard. Sadly, my own experiences resulted in exit, but I hope this account enables others (female and male) to resist and act against bullying in HE. My autoethnography is a written form of expression of both micro-resistance (Bristow et al., 2017) and subtle activism (Kjærgaard et al., 2024), albeit after the event, trying to effect positive social and political change in the academy, both in embracing/ encouraging different ways of writing and better ways of managing. This is my personal protest, and a rallying call to other academics who have been in similar situations to speak out and be heard, although I appreciate this may be distressing to narrate and may make you feel vulnerable. Together, through nonviolent collective action, we might achieve small wins (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996) by calling out bad managerial practices.

I have tried to be reflexive, revealing myself and my story, which I acknowledge is, of course, subjective, situated and partial. I have been writing and re-writing this story for years now, and often stop and think, and re-think whether I am being truthful and fair. This version has been a very different paper to write, feeling relieved to be able to throw off the shackles of mainstream academic writing, freeing myself from the Victorian corset (Gilmore et al., 2019), and delete huge tracts from the original manuscript. I am deeply grateful for the kind words of encouragement and incredibly helpful, generous, gentle steer, re-direction and re-framing from reviewers, inspiring me to be more confident in what I am trying to say and how this might contribute to the journal and to learning about management practices in the academy.

I offer a moderate (Wall and Stahlke, 2016) autoethnography, both evocative and analytical, and hope you are moved by my pitiful story of how I lost my dignity, my academic identity and my

self-worth. I want you to try to understand how painful this was and, as a small, subtle act of academic activism (Kjærgaard et al., 2024), how I want to expose the issue of what could constitute academic bullying and mundane (mis)use of academic managerial power so that others might better resist it. This is a bit of a mixed-up story of my silence, voice and exit (Hirschman, 1972; Kolarsak and Aldrich, 1980) and disappointment (Mitra et al., 2024), illustrating the various ways I have tried to respond to bad managerial practices and deteriorating relations. This is a small example of responding to Cunliffe's (2022: 7) call for more human and reflexive theorising and I hope my story resonates with others experiencing similar situations in the neoliberal university and 'provokes others into reflecting on an issue'. My writing differently encompasses method (autoethnography), content (academic managerial bullying) and style (evocative-analytic) (Boncori and Smith, 2019). Following Grey and Sinclair's (2006: 452) vision of 'writing differently', I hope that my story might also be a 'powerful and evocative performance, able to change peoples' experiences of the world' of academia, at least.

In writing differently, I do not follow a conventional structure. The article unfolds as follows. First, I introduce my self and context, providing background for the ensuing account. Next I explain my organisational autoethnographic stance. Then, I share selected vignettes of my story, vividly painting the picture of a once happy, successful scholar and academic manager being quietly bullied and humiliated. I situate my personal experiences of disengagement in the context of Kahn's (1990, 1992) work on engagement. I question whether initially I was too engaged ('over'-engagement) and if this was my fault, or precipitated by the masculine neoliberal university pushing academics to become workaholics, constantly available, constantly performing their entrepreneurial selves to satisfy managerial needs (Coin, 2017)? I recount a painful shift and question if my plummet into disengagement was caused by bad management, and whether this was my own or my various managers'? To contemplate this, I turn to theories of workplace bullying and subtle activism, where I attempted to complain and be heard but which resulted in disappointment and exit. Through these juxtaposing personal and organisational lenses, I offer a personally harrowing story of becoming disengaged in the academy. I conclude that academic managers need to be aware of their (poor) managerial practices, relationships and decision-making, which can constitute workplace bullying, and those experiencing this need to find voice, rather than be silenced or exit, causing universities to lose valuable, caring academics. Such situations might be possibly salvaged through formal managerial conversations, such as individual performance development reviews (PDRs), despite the reluctance of senior managers, and I used PDR to attempt to unsettle these everyday managerial practices (Kjærgaard et al., 2024). Yet, such activities need partnership dialogue in a safe environment to ensure employees have voice and managers hear and respond.

My self

I am a middle-aged, female professor and a quiet feminist. After a career in nursing, including as a trainer and educator, I studied management at undergraduate level and my doctorate explored human resource development (HRD) and managerial learning in the British National Health Service (NHS). I was then appointed as a research Project Manager on a one-year contract at a small, rural university. After this, I was appointed as Lecturer in Human Resource Management in a male-dominated Business School, focused on quantitative research in financial studies. Later, I moved to the School of Nursing for 4 years to develop a Masters degree in leadership, was promoted to Senior Lecturer there, and then attracted back to the Business School and became a professor of HRD. As professor, I was appointed Director of Postgraduate Studies (Business and Management) to lead academic development. The following year, I was invited by the (male) Dean of College to join the School's senior management team, as one of the three senior managers. To

my knowledge, the School had not had a female in such a senior managerial position before, and I was committed to foster good managerial practices. In addition, previous managers had been appointed as ‘Buggins’ turn’ with no associated management development, although that does not imply they were ‘bad’ managers. I had studied management, managed a team of nurses, and led a research team, so I felt I had some knowledge and experience to draw on and share. As Butler et al. (2017: 469) note, ‘We might also become university managers ourselves, with all the risks, tensions and paradoxes this entails (Parker, 2004), with the hope of creating change from within’. I felt an obligation, like Śliwa (in Butler et al., 2017), to contribute to the management of the school, to try to improve the way things are done here and to develop ‘the good business school’ (Rhodes and Pullen, 2023), although I acknowledge this is a product of the wider political system shaping higher education. I enjoyed these senior managerial positions and was acutely aware of being a role model to female colleagues across teaching, research and administration aspects of academic work. I was a happy, hard-working professor and academic manager, until the last four years when I experienced what I perceived as bullying and humiliation . . .

How can I tell this story? I love writing, yet sadly, this is not a love story (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018) but of falling out of love with my work situation, which I had loved deeply. I have been writing autoethnographically for years, but this is much more visceral, much more painful than anything else I had experienced in my working life. As a professor, in many ways, I was in a privileged position, yet autoethnography is ‘not only for the marginalized and silenced whose autoethnographies are often powerful in their raw frankness’ (Tienari, 2019: 578). Yet, I felt marginalised and was silenced and it is only now I find courage to show some raw frankness in telling my tale of bullying and resistance (Bristow et al., 2017). So, before sharing my story, I just want to say a little about my take on autoethnography.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a different way of doing and writing research (Boncori, 2022; Kostera, 2022), employing narrative to connect an aspect of the (auto) self to the (ethnos) cultural context through storytelling (graphy). The purpose is not only to write and reflect on personal stories but to expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of a researcher’s personal experiences (Chang, 2013: 108). This involves zooming in and zooming out (Ellis and Bochner, 2006) from introspection, *about my disengagement and humiliation*, to cultural analysis of *bullying in HE*. Autoethnographic inquiry contributes to the ‘writing differently’ movement (Boncori, 2022; Kostera, 2022) by resisting the dominant (masculine, colonial, capitalist) text production in academia. Autoethnography is an antidote and resistance to the conventional scientific method (Essén and Värlander, 2013), both in the way(s) research is conducted and written, by illuminating complex and contested social situations through rich descriptions, yet has been vilified for being egoistic, narcissistic and self-indulgent (Coffey, 1999; Delamont, 2007). Despite this, Denzin (2006: 422) seeks to ‘change the world by writing from the heart’ and this form of research eschews traditional social science, dominated by scientism associated with the need for validity, reliability and generalisability, and instead seeks personal meaning and empathetic connection. Autoethnography draws upon memories of events, conversations, meetings, emotions, as well as other sources such as field notes and interviews (Holman Jones et al., 2013), to produce ‘meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience . . .’ (Ellis et al., 2011: 2). Denzin (2010: 38) suggests autoethnographies ‘focus on epiphanies . . . turning point moments in people’s lives’, which can occur in the workplace, and therefore be of interest to managers. These epiphanies, not necessarily spectacular or dramatic (Tienari, 2024), prompt reflection, so they become enlightening and positive but can also be dark and disempowering, as well as desperately sad, for example,

losing a baby (Boncori and Smith, 2019), or even absent in a ‘bad’ autoethnography (O’Shea, 2018).

This location within the workplace has led to the notion of organisational autoethnography (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012; Sambrook and Herrmann, 2018). Boyle and Parry (2007) suggest that the prime focus of an organisational autoethnography is to illuminate the relationship between the individual and the organisation. Autoethnographies are prevalent in academia (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009, 2011; Ellis et al., 2017; Jago, 2002; Vicary and Jones, 2017), and increasing in management learning (Bell and King, 2010; Boncori and Smith, 2019; Gilmore et al., 2019; O’Shea, 2018; Sambrook, 2021). As academics, we have opportunity to write about work and our relationships with our managers and university organisations and the practices we encounter therein, such as bullying (Sobre-Denton, 2012; Vickers, 2007), connecting the personal (disengagement) and cultural (bullying).

Writing autoethnographically can take different forms. Anderson (2006) argues that analytical autoethnography is theoretically and methodologically the ‘best way’, one extreme of a continuum (Le Roux, 2017), but this can seem detached, and pseudo-scientific. Ellis and Bochner (2006) defend evocative autoethnography, the other extreme, but this has been accused of being insular and lacking in self-reflexivity (see Allen’s (1997) critique of Ellis (1986, 1995)), or offering naïve realism (Coghlan, 2007) that does not create wider sociological understandings (Sparkes, 2002). Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) helpfully suggest combining the evocative with the analytical. Taking this further, and from a critical perspective, autoethnographies can be radical (Holman Jones, 2005), affecting organisational change. I offer a moderate (in between) autoethnography (Wall and Stahlke, 2016). By telling my evocative story, with analysis through bullying and activism theory, I attempt to raise awareness, make sense of and hopefully help effect micro changes in how we deal with ugly university upsets by opening up space for dialogue (Kahn, cited in Burjek, 2015). I am inspired by Foster (2017), who argues that autoethnography matters – as resistance – when academic labour exists in an age of anxiety created by neoliberalism.

Autoethnography is suitable for my story in that it enables me to expose my personal experiences of managerial bullying and humiliation, as traumas and turning points (Lapadat, 2017), perhaps increasingly encountered but seldom voiced, within the neoliberal university cultural context. I write this both as a form of therapy and as a form of subtle activism, not just to call out and unsettle everyday ‘bad’ managerial practices (Kjærgaard et al., 2024), but to be useful (Kenny, 2021), particularly to other academics who have faced or are facing similar social and political situations. This might normalise or at least explain something about their own painful situation (Kenny, 2021). As Kenny (2021: 209) notes,

Academia can seem so totally set up for individual attainment, for competition, for self-aggrandizement. Its structures and cultures shape the subjectivities and not in a very nice way. Even critical management studies, an area focused on resistance that is often collective, often feels contentious and aggressive, despite that it would surely make sense to stick together given the role of capitalism in driving us to global catastrophe, and all that.

However, being an activist or doing activism is not an easy option. Like Kenny, early in my academic career, I often sat silent during meetings while dominant male discourses prevailed, too cowardly to intervene. Perhaps I was implicitly playing that performance game and not wanting to sabotage my potential career opportunities. But I gradually realised that as I was one of very few female academics in senior roles I had an obligation to speak out to support those in less powerful positions, early career researchers, qualitative researchers, female academics. And now I speak out again . . .

In sharing this autoethnographic account of my disengagement (my epiphany), I am relying on recall, and memory can be a strange thing. Giorgio (2013) cautions that when we rely on memory as our data, we should be careful to use it critically and responsibly, acknowledging that memory is not static and our version can be contested by others. I have attempted to write this several times, but recalling the following events proved too painful earlier. It is only now, having been able to reflect and accept, that I can lay bare the events and their impact on me. Yet, I have tried to be as honest as I can, and attempt to reveal the incidents in a logical, chronological way, writing each of the events as vignettes (Humphreys, 2005). In writing about my workplace relationships reflexively (Etherington, 2007), and aware of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), I refer to a period of employment where I had several male line managers and did not identify any one of these, to afford them anonymity. I also employ some degree of ethnographic fictionalisation (Humphreys and Watson, 2009), slightly changing the details of revelations and removing names, again to maintain anonymity.

My story – an engagement catastrophe

Here, I share vignettes of critical incidents in my journey to disengagement.

The dawning of my contemplation of employee engagement

I supervised a doctoral student interested in employee engagement. During our supervision sessions, the student talked of her personal attempt to sustain engagement, raising the question: is it an employee's responsibility? The majority of literature focuses on HR's attempt to measure, monitor, manage and manipulate employee engagement for maximum (individual/organisational) performance. The student had asked her former line manager to support her own personal attempts, and the lack of response led to feelings of abject disengagement. Despondent, after months of trying, she sought engagement elsewhere and quit her job. This raised questions for me: Why was she not able to retrieve her engagement in that work context? How good was her relationship with her manager? How much do managers influence engagement?

What about my own engagement?

While supervising her, I questioned my own engagement. I had always loved my work. I regarded myself as exceptionally engaged, surely a virtue to my business school and the organisation? I reflected on my roles (senior manager, Director of PG programmes, lead for Business and Management, manager, professor) and realised I was a role model for other academics. But what model was I presenting – that of a workaholic, promptly responding to emails, even in the evening and at weekends? Was that a good role model, particularly for female academics who had heavier domestic responsibilities (predominantly childcare) than me? I appeared successful, but at what personal cost? An unhealthy (unsafe) obsession with my work? Able to work ridiculous hours as my partner worked long shifts and at weekends? Was I engaged, or over-engaged? Could I blame myself for over-engagement or was this a consequence of the neoliberal university, where toxic leadership exploited my autonomy and freedom to ensure I conformed to managerial demands for performance? Was this an example of Willmott's (1993) Orwellization of academic organisational culture?

This dawning of contemplation of my own engagement coincided with changes at work. Internal promotions led to the formation of a new senior management team. I had deliberately decided not to put myself forward for a more senior position. I was hugely busy with PhD

supervision, school and university-wide administrative roles, teaching, and editorial roles, which I didn't want to relinquish, and wanted to continue with my current managerial role. But were these just excuses? Was I too frightened to assume this leadership role? Was I scared I would not succeed? Whatever, I was shattered by the repercussions. The new internally appointed senior manager could be considered as one of a 'detached cadre of managers' (Fleming, 2021: 8) who moved into higher education and then out after a few years. Content with the contents of my managerial role, I sought to continue this but was immediately tasked by the new senior manager with a new project completely outside of my experience, competence or confidence. On reflection, this could be construed as a form of constructive dismissal, but at that time all I could do was resign my managerial position and offer pathetic excuses, such as increasing journal editorial commitments. The entire ugly process felt like a huge smack in the face, like an utter lack of respect for my previous contribution and service. When it was announced in the next school meeting that I had stepped down from this senior role, I was not publicly thanked, as was the norm. Instead, we moved swiftly on to the next agenda item. Colleagues looked across the room at me, eyes rolled, eyebrows raised and frowns appeared. They were shocked at the lack of recognition of my contribution. I felt they could feel my visceral embarrassment, unable to be concealed or contained in my porous academic skin (Brewis and Williams, 2019). The meeting skipped along, I lowered my head, eschewing any further eye contact. As we left the room, there were sighs, hugs and then questions – why wasn't I thanked? Did anyone hear him thank me? Why wasn't my contribution recorded in the minutes? Please stop! Please stop what I'm sure was warmly intended concern with what only felt like further personal humiliation. This was the first fall on my way to dis-engagement. It certainly dented my confidence and eroded my engagement, but perhaps I could bounce back? Maybe, but there was more to come . . .

Trying to find balance . . . things were taken away!

After a close family member bereavement and a personal health scare, I decided to take a year's unpaid leave, and this would also remove myself from what I perceived as the increasingly unpleasant culture. I carefully planned this so my teaching was condensed into one semester and covered by colleagues at little or no detriment to their workloads and well-being. When I tried to organise some recompense to continue supervising doctoral students online I was told this would set an unacceptable precedent. So, with a heavy heart, I formally withdrew but continued to liaise informally with second supervisors and provide feedback on draft chapters. I agreed with journal teams to continue with my editorial roles, albeit on a reduced level. I felt as though I was still giving a lot of myself to the school, with no financial benefit. When I requested that the school would continue to pay my pension contributions, I was coldly told this was not part of the deal! So, disappointed, I went on leave . . .

When I returned, I had negotiated to move to half-time working (a 6-month block) to find more balance in my life. Unbeknown to me, I was relieved of my long-standing additional (and separately recompensed) London-campus teaching, only to be inadvertently informed by the less senior member of staff who was replacing me.

Scene: *Sally is walking in the hills near her home. She meets one of her colleagues.*

Sally: Hello, good to see you. Yes, thanks, I had a great 12 months off, surfing, mountain-biking, travelling around in the campervan. But it's good to be back and I'm looking forward to teaching in London next month.

Them: That's good to hear. (*Awkward silence . . .*) I'm doing your teaching now.

Sally: Oh! (*Not sure what to say, rapidly searching for words . . .*) Oh! When was that decided?

Them: I don't know, I was just told I was teaching that module.

Sally: (*Full of emotions, embarrassment, anger, frustration, sadness, anger, embarrassment, anger. . . tries to smile and be polite*). OK, hope it goes well. Right, I'd better be off. See you in work. (*Turns around and leaves quickly, tears pounding down her face*).

As their words tumbled out, I could barely hide my pain and sadness, and then anger, desperately trying to manage the emotions haemorrhaging through my stunned skin (Brewis and Williams, 2019). I was devastated that no-one had had the courtesy to even inform me of this decision, let alone discuss it with me. Where was the dialogue that Kahn (cited in Burjek, 2015) advocates? No-one had talked to me about this. I was deprived of the means to defend myself or argue back by lack of time and information (Hartz, 2023). There was no apparent reason to withdraw this work from me, as I could teach the module within my agreed 6-month block. I asked the London Centre manager, who appeared embarrassed and told me it wasn't their decision. So, why had the senior manager decided to strip this from me? I was told I couldn't hold an additionally recompensed role on my part-time contract. Was this discrimination against part-time staff? Was I being punished for trying to find work-life balance? Were colleagues jealous of my resistance against neoliberal performativity? Was this some form of gendered workload allocation (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021) or an example of gendered inequity and injustice in the business school (Gurrieri et al., 2022) or another example of the masculine 'myth of meritocracy' (Johansson et al., 2024)? And yet, I did nothing! Had I engaged in quiescence, 'inactivity in a situation where resistance might be expected – that is, where something of value is under threat' (Bowes-Catton et al., 2020: 380)? Yet, quiescence 'is a *temporary* state of quietness and inaction, which always contains the potential for action' (Bowes-Catton et al., 2020: 381).

Within days, I found out I had been similarly relieved of my roles on the college Research and Ethics Committees, without discussion, and again only accidentally informed by the junior colleague replacing me, creating even further humiliation. I had been a critical voice on these committees, supporting marginalised colleagues, and now I had been silenced. I could accept that not being available 12 months a year might hamper my involvement in these roles but would have offered to commit to attending meetings online during my 6 months off, but this was never considered. Did my senior colleagues think I was no longer committed? Was this further discrimination? Was this a way of removing 'differently engaged' staff from senior roles? If someone had had the decency to sit down with me and explain these roles could assist junior colleagues in developing their CVs, I would have been happy to mentor them, but there was no discussion whatsoever. Out of desperation, I talked to another senior manager. His response: 'I'll talk to him, but you need to talk with him'. How could I? Why did he do this? Because he now had the power, in this more senior position? Perhaps he didn't like me – a female, middle-aged, qualitative, critical, management learning scholar – but this was still bad management practice! Talk? I like talking, I'm talkative, but talk with him? I had been a manager, in a relatively powerful position, but lacked confidence to talk to my line manager, perhaps not unsurprisingly as he was the perpetrator of the perceived bullying and humiliation.

Trying to resist . . . punished and humiliated again!

On the now steep and rapid path to disengagement, I encountered further despair, this time in relation to the political pressures of the Research Excellent Framework (REF), journal list fetishism (Willmott, 2011) and the ‘publication game’ (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020). I succumbed to a culture where ‘neoliberalism found fertile ground in academics whose predispositions to “work hard” and “do well” meshed perfectly with its demands for autonomous, self-motivating, responsibilised subjects’ (Gill, 2010: 241). I was guilty of engaging in self-disciplining complicity (Tim-adical Writing Collective, 2017) regarding performance metrics, always trying to get published in the ‘best’ journals, and yet, by writing differently, autoethnographically, my work was regularly rejected from the ‘best’. I had the equivalent of four 3* publications, so I thought I met my ‘targets’ (McCann et al., 2020) but was not submitted because not all of the journals appeared in the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) journal ranking list. As Rhodes and Pullen (2023) note, ‘Publishing in so called “top-tier journals” has become a mark of scholarly excellence as if the quality of research can all be boiled down to a singular and simple metric’. The decision to exclude me was made despite Professor Hugh Willmott’s seminar – which I had personally arranged, after our collaboration (Sambrook and Willmott, 2014), to discuss REF – about not relying on the CABS list! This created even further humiliation among senior and junior colleagues. Was this the corporate culture ‘legitimizing a mode of control that purposefully seeks to shape and regulate the practical consciousness and . . . unconscious strivings of employees’ (Willmott, 1993: 523)? If you don’t conform to the CABS list, your identity is undermined. The ‘power of self-determination’ must be tied ‘exclusively to the realization of corporate values’ (Willmott, 1993: 526). Resisting publishing in CABS list journals, I had not complied, not even selectively in a calculative manner, which suggested ‘lack of commitment’ (Willmott, 1993: 537). Lund and Tienari (2019) argue that passion and care shape the practices of academic writing, whether conforming or not, and can become a threat to the gendered neoliberal university and a source of resistance to it. Perhaps my writing autoethnographically and differently was a form resistance, but it might have sabotaged my identity as a serious academic from my colleagues’ perspectives. Kiriakos and Tienari (2018: 271) note, ‘it takes courage to continue practicing writing in a manner that feels meaningful’, especially when Ellis (2009: 371) summarised one of the criticisms of autoethnography as it ‘isn’t sufficiently realist or scientific; it’s too aesthetic and literary’. Autoethnography is derided by those affiliated to ‘scientific’ method and the distanced researcher form of writing so it can be difficult to publish, especially in CABS-type journal ranking lists. However, it is encouraging to see the writing differently movement, including autoethnography, progress in highly-ranked journals, such as *Management Learning*, although I wish this could have happened earlier. Without such recognition, I had been ‘relentlessly subjected to measurement, criticism and rejection’, generating deep insecurities regarding my worth, identity and standing (Gabriel, 2012: 769). Another example of demeaning, depriving and isolating me and a fundamental lack of care (Hartz, 2023). Yet another example of ‘the petty but powerful managerial games and tactics . . . that are an attempt to show us “our place” in the managerial university’ (Hartz, 2023: 14). I was a senior academic, leading the business and management team and yet I wasn’t submitted to REF, which was further humiliation in front of my ‘junior’ colleagues, duly playing the performance game and conforming to managerial demands. That was it – I had reached my ‘breaking point’.

. . . Catastrophe, complaint, conversation!

I’m not sure I ever fully recovered from what felt like catastrophic personal assault. How/could I complain about how meaningful aspects of my work had been unilaterally withdrawn and I

wouldn't be submitted in the REF? Ahmed (2021), in the context of academia, talks about giving room to complaint, by listening to complaint, even though those who complain can be dismissed and rendered incredible (unbelievable). I tried to ask why and complain not only about this sudden loss, but also the process, but this was quickly dismissed as being part of my new working hours, which we had never discussed. No-one in the school wanted to listen. I experienced the painful emotional labour of complaint, the lack of care at the heart of my complaint (Ahmed, 2021). I didn't know what to do and, perhaps because of my HRD background, I turned to a colleague in staff development who I felt comfortable talking to. As I recounted my experiences, my emotions swelled and I could not hold back the tears; I was overwhelmed with grief as I articulated what I suddenly realised was this relentless process of humiliation that had finally dis-engaged me. I was supposed to be going into another (formal) meeting with her after this chat, but I was in no state. I say chat, but all she did was listen, and offer one suggestion: try dealing with it through the individual Performance Development Review (PDR) process. She advised me to request a PDR meeting and talk through these incidents with the senior manager. How could I talk about this with the man who had stripped me of so many aspects of my work that engaged me, without the decency to even inform me? I felt sick at the thought. However, I requested the meeting and spent the ensuing days besieged with anxiety, making notes, rehearsing what I was going to say, trying to anticipate responses and objections, oscillating between brief confidence to utter, gut-wrenching panic. When the day came, it was an incredibly difficult meeting, particularly at the outset, but it did bring things out into the open and enable a conversation, however stilted and awkward for me, and I felt it was helpful. After I carefully presented my account, I was given the explanation that

as these roles were being carried out satisfactorily by the staff to whom they had been assigned, and as the duties were full-time (12-month) obligations, it was not appropriate that they be re-assigned to Professor Sambrook given her new 0.5 contractual status. (PDR document).

I was grateful for the eventual formal explanation but still disputed the managerial process and somehow summoned the confidence to request an official apology. His words were spoken very quietly in the room – and not forthcoming, at first, in the official paperwork but after I politely noted this inadvertent 'oversight', I finally received my apology in writing. Was this a micro-victory for me? Or did it cause more harm?

Letting go

After the humiliation and loss, I made initial attempts to re-engage, but my confidence was shattered and I could never regain the foundational (content) and relational (Kahn et al., 2013) meaningfulness I had so enjoyed. I had shifted from a high performer/achiever, deeply committed to the school and our staff and students, to rapid withdrawal. There were further management changes and another new, internal (male) senior manager was appointed, and I never even contemplated applying for that job. Had I lost engagement in the specific aspects of the work, the whole job, the school (and its senior management), and/or the university? I felt I was a competent and well-regarded researcher and received exceptional teaching evaluations from students and external examiners. I even enjoyed my school/college administrative roles and was regularly asked to serve on university-wide panels. So, the content of my work didn't disengage me – quite the contrary. When some of the content of my role was withdrawn – without any processual discussion whatsoever, on a relational level, I experienced humiliation. Why did senior managers cause my disengagement, removing me from meaningful roles, undermining my professorial status and identity, with no dialogue whatsoever? Was this academic bullying (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020)?

My life interest shifted, away from work – which had been my hobby, too – to leisure. I endured three years working half time, feeling as if I was becoming more and more peripheral. Was disengagement my strategy of micro-resistance and non-compliance (Bristow et al., 2017), perceived as ‘bad’ by managers but ‘good’ for my well-being? Was I quietly quitting (Morrison-Beedy, 2022), as a form of resistance to the neoliberal university? With the university undergoing massive structural and financial ‘alignment’, I eventually decided to apply for voluntary redundancy (VR) and early retirement. From quietly quitting to full blown leaving a job I had loved, I could be contributing to the ‘quit lit’ in academia (Coin, 2017). As Coin (2017: 705) explains,

the body experiences competition as a celebrated form of self-abuse. In this context, quitting is not merely about resigning an academic position. It is a symptom of the urge to create a space between the neoliberal discourse and the sense of self; an act of rebellion intended to abdicate the competitive rationality of neoliberal academia and embrace different values and principles.

Even VR was a humiliating process as my senior manager, while openly supporting my request, also wanted to replace me – undermining the notion of redundancy and hence leading to HR denying me my request on two separate occasions. After the first application was rejected, I experienced further detachment. Although this was supposed to be a confidential process, word inevitably got out and I sensed my colleagues would now be certain I was no longer committed to them, the school, the students . . .

Perhaps as the content and context changed, so did my conscience. I no longer felt that I was letting colleagues or students down when I was away on my 6 months off. I bitterly hated feeling like that, but it became my coping mechanism, as my academic identity and work place were becoming increasingly precarious in the performative (Jones et al., 2020) and neoliberal university (Nordbäck et al., 2021). I became semi-detached, which made it easier to eventually fully detach – but I didn’t want to be completely disconnected. I didn’t want to let go of my work, my identity, but if I didn’t I just might just completely ‘lose it’ and totally break down. Coin (2017: 712–713) notes how

the labor of academia can lead to a vicious cycle of overload and burn out, producing a tremendous dislocation within the academic subject. The constant mis-match between organizational strain and personal values produce burn-out and ethical conflicts particularly in those individuals who perceive academic labor as a passion or a labor of love.

Yes, I loved my work and was broken when meaningful aspects were bluntly dissected. Why did I not do or say something? Bowes-Catton et al. (2020: 381) note ‘that love for one’s job can *increase* quiescence’. Did that explain my lack of action and resistance? But where was my manager’s ethic of care, ethic of love (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018: 269) in any form of organisational justice?

Months after a second failed attempt, I suddenly received an email from the senior manager:

Just to let you know that the University might be willing to revisit its earlier decisions on (not awarding) voluntary severance. It is possible that the University could contact you though I have no information on either certainty or timing. There is a voluntary redundancy scheme in place with interested parties asked to submit applications before 10 June.

Please let me convey how highly the School values you and this email is purely for information.

Given ongoing financial issues, the university would now consider my application, and finally I was offered VR and early retirement. This was a chance to completely let go, but I felt I had some

responsibilities to honour. I tried to negotiate to continue supervising PhD students – no, his email (below) said this would set a precedent – but this had been perfectly acceptable in previous years, with previous supervisors, and continues to be so now:

At this time it is difficult for the School to outsource supervision. We are endeavouring to provide our students with the best possible support. I am sure you appreciate the difficulties we face and that if one supervisor leaves and services are retained for a price, this sets a precedent that others will seek.

I felt guilty at the prospect of letting down colleagues and current students, and creating work for ‘new’ supervisors with little knowledge of the topics or research methods. Was I disciplining myself with feelings of anxiety, shame and guilt for falling short (Willmott, 1993) of my own values? I had to accept my relationship with the school had deteriorated and it was time for departure (Mitra et al., 2024).

When I had finally decided to leave, to quit a job I had loved, I sent an email to all school staff, plus others in the college who I had worked with over the years, emphasising how much I had enjoyed working with them, and received this short reply from the senior manager:

Dear Colleague, please join me in thanking Sally for her commitment to the School, and wishing her the very best for the future.

Perhaps it was best to make a clean break, but I desperately wanted to retain some association with the workplace I had served with dedication for (most of the) 19 years. It was with enormous pride and relief that I was awarded Emeritus (emerita) status by the university – I could still call myself a professor, for which I had worked so hard. I felt with this title I could cling on to my academic identity, and this would help with any future freelance work. I could also still use my university email address, which gave me a lifeline to academia, a career I had loved. I could still be contacted ‘professionally’ and I could still work professionally, using online library services, for example. On a more mundane level, it was also strangely nice to receive all the routine Business School emails . . . for the first few weeks, but then they suddenly stopped. Again, this was another blow, but I had made the decision to leave, and the school was moving on. I had to accept that although I was an emerita professor of the university, I was no longer employed by the school. It’s still raw now, but I have kept in touch with a few close colleagues and recently there have even been attempts to re-engage . . .

Some attempts at sense-making

I was a happy, hard-working employee, loving my work, feeling proud of my service . . . until the last four years, when I was quietly humiliated by internally appointed new senior managers, until I could bear it no longer. Like Śliwa (in Butler et al., 2017), I was close to tipping over the edge, harming my well-being (Hurd and Singh, 2021).

As I try to make sense of my experiences, I now attempt to identify potential reasons for my catastrophic disengagement. Why didn’t I apply for the more senior positions? I felt I had appropriate managerial knowledge and skills, but had I been too frightened to manage, or frightened I couldn’t manage a group of individually self-interested, competitive entrepreneurs (Hartz, 2023)? Perhaps I wouldn’t have been appointed anyway, so why dwell on this? Because it was precisely a new senior manager, and then another, that precipitated my disengagement. How had a series of sudden, unilaterally-decided work changes led to a situation that became utterly intolerable? Were the series of male academic managers individually guilty of bad management practices, having (to

my knowledge) never engaged in any formal academic management learning and development, or can they be forgiven for merely being compliant with the neoliberal corporate culture?

From the personal perspective, Kahn (cited in Burjek, 2015) argued one way to improve engagement is to treat employees as partners, involving them in continuous dialogue about how to design and *alter* their roles, tasks and working relationships, meaning managers need to talk with employees and ensure it is safe for employees to speak openly of their experiences at work. Yet, this requires consideration of power dynamics. My managers did not afford me that crucial dialogue, and (initially) I did not feel safe to raise my concerns. I remained silent. At that point, I didn't consider any forms of resistance and was careful to govern my tongue (Docherty, 2015: 107). I wanted to 'be' engaged through meaningful work and when this was withdrawn I tried various strategies to personally manage this. Fletcher (2017: 475) called for an alternative (critical management) perspective, 'to explore the potential tensions and power dynamics that occur when employees utilize personal strategies to exert control and influence over their personal role engagement'. This requires sensitive and supportive conversations (Kahn, cited in Burjek, 2015; Francis and Keegan, 2020), yet it takes considerable courage to confront your manager, if you believe this is the source of your ebbing engagement, due to their perceived lack of interpersonal skills and managerial development. My staff development colleague suggested using a formal organisational procedure to raise these grievances, to give room to speak my complaint (Ahmed, 2021). Although I initially resisted engaging in an PDR meeting, it was a formal procedure I could draw on to raise my painful feelings of becoming disengaged, where events and decisions by senior managers – over which I seemingly had no control – were disengaging me! Yet, I could control my role in the PDR, and take back my freedom (Jones et al., 2020). I could record my version of events in a formal document and request an apology. To me, this was a small win, a form of micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Yet, even though I managed to secure a very softly-spoken apology during the PDR meeting, this was not forthcoming in the formal documentation (a powerful act of dismissal) and I had to request this (further humiliation). I had been listened to, and my complaint could not be dismissed, but the emotional labour of complaining and the lack of care at the heart of my complaint (Ahmed, 2021) was deeply painful. Śliwa and Prasad (2022: 754) call for more care in academia, noting 'Academics are known to hold on to grudges, (perceived) slights and animosity for far too long', which is, perhaps, understandable as 'much of our sense of self is inextricably connected with our professional identity'. I have expressed my experiences as honestly and reflexively as I can, attempting to be evocative and analytic, and hope you can understand that these were more than grudges and perceived slights, and devastated my sense of self and professional identity. Had there been some care after I decided to relinquish my managerial role, and in the subsequent decisions to remove meaningful aspects of my role, I may not have disengaged nor had reason to feel disappointed, complain and eventually quit. Perhaps, if I had sought help and requested a PDR earlier, to talk through my disengagement, there may have been a chance to rebuild managerial relationships, and I wish I had learned this earlier. Mitra et al. (2024: 5) state disappointment provides an opportunity for learning, however painful, and this was desperately painful.

From an organisational perspective, how could I talk about my disappointment (Mitra et al., 2024)? How could I talk about bullying when these changes could be legitimised by corporate REF culture? As Parker (2014) notes, it is difficult to argue with university change management programmes aimed at job cuts and refocusing research towards journal rankings, and many of his colleagues saw exit as the only viable option, as was mine. I had been silent, then tried to use my voice to articulate my disappointment but, ultimately, I sought exit, which was humiliating in itself. Like Parker (2014: 282), resistance appeared to be limited to exit'. The notion of voice, silence and exit, is similar to Mitra et al.'s (2024: 3) 'identification dilemmas – *defence, deference, deterioration and departure*'. In defence, I tried to protect my identity, and identify with the organisation; in

deference, I revised my expectations, and tried to respect the reasons for these humiliating practice/actions; in deterioration, I suffered debilitating, personal decline, detaching and actively disengaging; in departure, I had to deviate from my expected path, and through the break down in relationships, I needed to separate. At each stage, I felt a range of emotions: anger, embarrassment, despair, fear, and ‘emotions can function as discursive resources for constructing and expressing self’ (Mitra et al., 2024: 19). These emotions caused by poor managerial practices constructed a sad self, a dejected self, no longer my self. I had not been consulted with. Instead of explaining, decisions about my work were simply communicated, commanded to me, as an assault on meaning (Gabriel, 2012: 1142), creating initial feelings of fear, low self-esteem and anxiety, which impeded any thoughts of resistance (McCann et al., 2020: 441). Like Stone et al. (2023), I experienced care-less spaces and use my autoethnographic voice to expose the invisibility of power structures and my precarity within academia. Stone et al. (2023) depict acts of micro-aggression, such as being missed out of email communications, and seeing their contributions not being acknowledged, which combined to engender a sense of not being valued. Yes, that’s how I felt, too. And I was an ‘older’ and ‘senior’ academic, further supporting ‘Marko’s story . . . that it is not only “young” academics who suffer in neoliberal academia’ (Nordbäck et al., 2021: 345). And I was a female academic, arguably judged (Johansson et al., 2024) as an ‘old woman’ and possibly subjected to a form of gendered workload allocation (Gurrieri et al., 2022). But I have worked through this, and it is only now that I feel I have the courage – and distance – to be able highlight the micro-physics of power, the mundane processes and decisions that undermined my autonomy and dignity at work, and reflect on how this can be resisted. This is—eventually—my form of activism, but it too late for me! I hope this account of power relations and conceivable bullying helps others reflect on similar situations and engage in their own micro-resistance, which might prevent quitting.

Conclusion

This article is about how I have used my voice to speak out about workplace bullying and humiliation in Higher Education, and hopefully be heard. I have articulated my pitiful, painful story through a moderate autoethnography (Wall and Stahlke, 2016), contributing to both the writing differently movement and to the growing critique of HE. My purpose is to give voice to workplace bullying and humiliation for others (especially managers) to understand what it feels like, to learn how to deal with it and to learn how collectively we might act to address it, through micro-resistance (Bristow et al., 2017) and quiet/subtle activism (Kjærgaard et al., 2024).

I have engaged in writing differently, to critique ‘bad’ academic management practices. My story offers an alternative voice to resist the neoliberal mantra of performativity and games; and to call out the humiliation I endured, caused by managers with little management learning and development. I experienced many of the struggles as Hurd and Singh (2021: 347), which ‘were neither unusual nor remarkable’ but reflecting on them has been ‘a powerful means of opening up space for self-care’. I tried silence, then voice but ended up exiting. I worked through all my disappointment talk: defence, deference, deterioration and departure. But should I have quitted? Coin (2017: 716) argues

I am persuaded we should take the act of quitting very seriously as it speaks the truth about learning and teaching conditions in today’s academic system. Yet I am afraid that quitting alone should be interpreted rather as a warning sign than as a solution. Quitting is a sign of the growing discomfort academics feel in their labor.

What I had experienced was beyond discomfort and exit was the only solution for me. As Zawadzki and Jensen (2020: 408) note, ‘Academic bullying is not only difficult to discover and prove but also difficult to resist. Human resources departments at universities, trade unions or other units that oversee cases of bullying tend to support organizational rather than individual interests’. Of course, I acknowledge this is just one story, but I hope it opens a conversation and might alert managers to the dynamic and fragile nature of foundational and relational aspects of engagement (Kahn and Fellows, 2013) and how it wasn’t me who decided to disengage, but managers’ unilateral decisions that withdrew meaning from my work that disengaged, and humiliated, me. Martyna Śliwa writes (in Butler et al., 2017: 469),

Many of the problems that confront modern universities are reflected in the concrete practices that academics face in daily life. For this reason, the narrative of one academic can help to illustrate both how these challenges emerge, but also what can be done to deal with them.

I hope this one narrative can illuminate how concrete managerial practices I faced as an academic can bring voice to bullying and provide possible ways of dealing with this, through written/narrative activism. I had been a victim but not a bystander (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020), as I supported others experiencing bullying. My actions (or attempts at activism), both during my downfall and even now, might be considered too timid, not radical enough (Tim-adical Writing Collective, 2017), and yet I suggest even small, daily, mundane actions as everyday micro-resistance can, collectively, effect some beneficial social and political change. As my academic work life unravelled, through managerial bullying, I turned to staff development to both informally talk through my complaints and formally record my own experiences of workplace, to unsettle ‘bad’ managerial practices (Kjærgaard et al., 2024). From here, we can begin conversations, but it takes courage to speak to academic managers, especially with poor interpersonal and communication skills, and you have to be heard. Like Coin (2017), I hope my story helps shift the conversation and makes a contribution to making small social and political changes in our academic labour, academic management and our academic cultural homes, not least to improve academic managerial learning and development.

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