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**ON BEING A NEW ACADEMIC IN THE NEW ACADEMY:
IMPACTS OF NEOLIBERALISM ON WORK AND LIFE OF A JUNIOR
FACULTY MEMBER¹**

Abstract

This article addresses impacts of neoliberalism on work and life in the academy from the perspective of a junior scholar. I borrow from autoethnographic methodology to analyze personal experiences since launching my academic career at a Canadian university. I am especially attuned to how neoliberalism affects my learning and/at work, and the conditions that I encounter there. Although I recognize that my personal background and situation, and the sociocultural context in which I live and work are particular, I see neoliberalism as an overarching ideology which increasingly frames life globally. My experiences and analysis, might offer insights into what life and work in the neoliberal academy looks and feels like for novice academics elsewhere.

Introduction

This article addresses impacts of neoliberalism on daily life for me as a junior scholar in Calgary, Alberta. Canada's proximity to the United States, more apparent to me in Calgary than in other Canadian cities where I have lived, makes American neoliberal rhetoric and values seem especially potent. The constitutional designation of all education as a provincial rather than a federal responsibility further marks Canada's neoliberalism as unique. These realities, along with the specifics of my own background and circumstances, help determine my options, choices and understandings, and clarify that neoliberal globalization is a locally varied, rather than a commonly experienced, phenomenon.

Borrowing from autoethnography, I approached writing this article as an opportunity to reflect on and analyze personal experiences since undertaking my PhD in 2004 and taking up my first academic position, at a public university in 2008. Working from a Gramscian perspective, I tend to look for tensions and paradoxes, including those between materiality and ideology or culture. With regards to this article, I place equal weight on the ideology of neoliberalism and the organization of academic work, in order to

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hold both sides of this tension in focus. The first step in this account is to conceptualize neoliberalism and the neoliberal academy.

Neoliberalism and the Neoliberal Academy

Characteristic of contemporary globalization, the ideology of neoliberalism attributes responsibility and blame for outcomes to the individual, and promotes the so-called free market as a replacement for both government and civil society. Through rhetoric of individual choice and authority, neoliberalism obscures social divisions and inequities. Its impacts are compounded as it combines with consumerist ideology. In the resulting paradigm, identity becomes a matter of choices from among options in the market. As Henry Giroux (2002) writes, “individuality is reduced to the endless pursuit of mass-mediated interests, pleasures, and commercially produced lifestyles” (p. 426). The entire democratic project assumes new meaning, as “the citizen is defined as an economic maximiser, governed by self-interest” (Lynch, 2006, p. 3).

This framework has profound implications for students, faculty members and academic institutions. For institutions, the groundwork is laid for “privatization, commercialization, and corporatization” (Kezar, 2004, p. 437), so that education moves from its “social or public charter to the individual and economic charter” (p. 438). Education becomes “another service to be delivered on the market to those who can afford to buy it...Choice is the carrot with which people are duped into believing that they will have freedom to buy what higher education they like in some brave new market” (Lynch, 2006, p. 3). In this milieu, vocational or commercializable knowledge is most valued. The academy becomes “a supplier of knowledge and knowledge workers – those capable of converting research and knowledge into economic commodities” (Bullen, Robb, & Kenway, 2004, pp. 3-4). In the name of flexibility, institutions are pressed to revise their organization and curricula, and understandings of the postsecondary institution and, indeed, the entire nation-state as “a market player” (Nicoll, 1997, p. 108) are reinforced. Notwithstanding possible advantages such as greater institutional responsiveness to students and the development of new areas of scholarship, Adrianna Kezar (2004) concludes that “the costs appear to outweigh the benefits” (p. 454). Among the costs, she identifies feelings of “conflict and disenfranchisement” (p. 439) for faculty. New technologies as well as ideological arguments are associated with a new form of flexibility for students, even if they are accompanied by new demands on finances and time.

None of this is meant to romanticize adult and higher education. Higher education has been central in (in)validating knowledge, and constructing social relations and practices based on assumptions of who has and is authorized to use knowledge. Adopting a Foucauldian line of reasoning, Katherine Nicoll (1997) argues that schools have tended to function “as resources for the state in the training of populations” (p. 101) and retain that function.

To the extent that neoliberalism and consumerism characterize a global phenomenon, the trends noted above can be seen as broadly important and relevant. They are also deeply paradoxical. Although globally active, the ideology of neoliberalism is one which plays out in regionally and locally distinct ways. One way to apprehend globalization, then, is to explore how it emerges in and seems to construct particularities of lived experience.

Following in Others’ Footsteps

Before I delve into my own experiences, I offer a review of recent scholarship on the confluence of novice scholars and the neoliberal academy. I focus on research-related pieces, many of which – like this one – discuss autoethnographic work. Writing from a poststructural perspective, Avril Aitken (2010) begins by recognizing the paradox of writing autoethnography, which infers a clear notion of self, when one accepts the impossibility of establishing or comprehending a stable, unified identity. Having entered the academy after a career as a school teacher, Aitken is struck by the challenge of “securing both authenticity and

success in higher education” (p. 65). That challenge arises from the juxtaposition of her primary identity as a teacher with her need to construct a new self-identity within a research-intensive institution. Framing herself as a practitioner researcher is one way that Aitken responds to research-related expectations and generates an identity that reflects important aspects of her sense of self.

Laurie-Ann Hellsten, Stephanie Martin, Laureen McIntyre and Audrey Kinzel (2011) document their experiences as female academics moving toward tenure in a research-intensive university. For their inquiry, they combined their separate stories into a “composite story.” A creative approach to co-authoring an autoethnography, that decision seems contrary to the premise that individual lives are worthy of study. Still, the authors raise several themes in their composite: “learning the culture; coping with a lack of support and isolation; negotiating life, work, and well-being; and making meaning of the tenure journey” (p. 273). They call on female academics to share their stories, and to come together in and encourage institutional support for developing “internal assets” (e.g., assertiveness, communication and negotiation skills) and “external assets” (e.g., mentoring, professional development and networking forums) (p. 275).

Sean Wiebe and Lyn Fels (2010) characterize their investigation as a “living inquiry” (p. 11). It is comprised of personal reflections on and conversations about their daily experiences through which they became more aware of institutional priorities, and how those help explain relationships and interactions temporally, spatially, socially and culturally. Using the metaphor of running a race in pursuit of tenure, they consider how “the parameters of the track” (p. 14) are developed, and how they spend time in their workplaces and “run...the track” (p. 16). Switching to the metaphor of assembly-line production, they discuss the realization that how their research is funded, conducted and disseminated involves a “jostling for position” (p. 17). They then return to the track metaphor, and write about the need to pace their publishing so that it is a steady process rather than one marked by spurts of activity. Other things that they notice are the size of colleagues’ tenure and promotion binders, the benefits and risks of stepping off the track for respite, and the potential to re-frame tenure procedures with “the possibility of multiple ways of engagement” (p. 23). Shortly after they write, “Even when we are not thinking about tenure, we are” (p. 21), they conclude that “we have the responsibility to shape the environment even as we are shaped by it...and there is agency in how we choose to play” (p. 23).

Michelle McGinn, Michael Manley-Casimir, Nancy Fenton and Carmen Shields discuss their focus group research with 15 scholars at various points on their academic pathways. They write about how new academics see themselves, relate to senior colleagues or “saga-keepers,” and experience limitations to their voices and roles. Challenges raised by participants include

navigating the uncertainty and strangeness of the Faculty and department and the sometimes unreasonable expectations created for new academics (McCall, 1999), learning about the social construction of the department and the individuals who are to be new colleagues, and coming to terms with the histories of the people and events that have shaped the tradition as remembered by the longer-established members (the insiders). (Manley-Casimir, Fenton, McGinn, & Shields, 2012, p. 9)

In another article, the same study team explores the constant evaluation that academics are subject to, and how people learn to live with and participate in such scrutiny (McGinn, Manley-Casimir, Fenton, & Shields, 2012). Examples noted include student evaluations, peer review for conference abstracts, journal or book manuscripts and funding proposals, and institutional reviews and promotion procedures. In this context, evaluation manifests another ideological discourse characteristic of neoliberal globalization – accountability. Evaluation tools and measures are constructed to apportion rewards in particular ways, creating, in Gramscian terminology, a “common sense” about who deserves hiring and promotion, publication, funding and awards. McGinn and her colleagues close by recommending that academics “try to focus on those aspects that are within their control and to resist the pressures to be brought down by

those things that are outside their control” (p. 77), and remain mindful of “individualized markers of success” (p. 77) when they function as the evaluators rather than the evaluated.

As the following discussion clarifies, my experiences seem similar in some central ways to others who have shared their experiences through their investigations. I also frame parts of my discussion in different terms. Points of similarity and difference confirm the value of autoethnography as a methodological approach and conceptual argument.

The Political as Personal/the Personal as Political: An Autoethnographic Approach

As noted above, much of the research on this topic has employed autoethnography. The central premise of autoethnography is that one’s experience is a legitimate site of inquiry. In her pivotal writing, Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997a) explains that this methodology can refer to ethnographic research into one’s cultural group or an autobiographical account connecting one’s life to social discourses and practices. Heewon Chang (2008) continues to develop these ideas. She promotes a version of autoethnography which “combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details” (p. 46), and characterizes it as “ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (p. 48).

In their conversational article, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2008) encourage sustained grounding in story rather than yielding to the inclination to produce generalized theory. As Ellis comments,

“Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn’t be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing.” (p. 433)

Later in the same article, Arthur Bochner asserts the empirical and transformative potential of autoethnography. In so doing, he positions autoethnography as both methodology, and epistemological and conceptual framework. In his words, “Traditional analysis is no more appropriate to understanding, interpreting, or changing people than is storytelling” (p. 439).

Many researchers who use autoethnography share the feminist belief that the personal is political and, in the reverse, that the political is personal. When it links the individual to a sociocultural context, autoethnography becomes a political undertaking. For Stacy Jones (2008), autoethnography “point[s] out not only the necessity of narrative in our world but also the power of narrative to reveal and revise that world” (pp. 207 & 211). Storytelling and stories, from this perspective, are processes and forms of inquiry, and move beyond description to analysis and action. That understanding of personal stories as sources of evidence and knowledge is consistent with a poststructural orientation. Although I maintain a good degree of materialist thinking, I concur with the poststructural assertion that identity and meaning are always partial and evolving. Rather than seeing this as a weakness of autoethnography, I see it as an admission that all research is limited, and that knowledge always has a degree of subjectivity.

In this paper, I explore intersections between my recent experiences in the academy, and neoliberal ideology and ideological practices. Autoethnography helps me accomplish that purpose by exposing or creating patterns and connections. Anecdotes about my observations and experiences as a junior faculty member become data, which are connected to relevant scholarship. Because these stories are comprised of publicly available information and do not expose anybody other than me beyond that public information, I did not go through the application process for an ethics certificate. Moving back and forth from personal stories to scholarly literature, I take up Reed-Danahay’s (1997a) challenge to transcend a dichotomous

view of autoethnographic research, to make some sense of (my own) academic life in terms of neoliberalism and of neoliberalism in terms of everyday moments in the academy.

Prelude to an Analysis

It's 2002 and, at 41, I apply for a Master of Education in adult education. I already have a Master's degree but, recently, have started a job that bores me to tears, after my previous community-based employer lost its government funding. Having worked for some 15 years in small, not-for-profit organizations in the community service sector, I begin my new job, a low level university administration position. I am surrounded by progressive, well intentioned faculty members, but feel under-valued and demoralized. Trying to compliment me, one faculty member explains that the others in the unit respect me. They think that I am bright enough to complete a PhD; I could, she says, be like them. Tuition waivers are a job perk, and having access to an interesting educational program might help make the job bearable.

I only last in my job for another few months. Soon after mentioning to my academic supervisor that I am looking for employment, I receive an email directing me to somebody who is looking for a research assistant. I meet that faculty member, we talk, and I am offered a six-month position on one of her projects. We'll see how things go.

*Eighteen months later, I am still working on the project and have written my final MEd paper using its data. Enjoying the research and the relationship with my supervisor, and with the support of my partner, I successfully apply to the PhD program. Confused for months about my focus, I am grateful for the ongoing work on the project – it is **the** perk of my job as a student. It engages me in critical, feminist research. Part of a national network, it takes me to meetings with scholars and students from various institutions. In time, I accompany my supervisor to conferences and we publish collaboratively. I learn about Canada's largest funder of social sciences research. Despite times of self-doubt and frustration, I feel supported and encouraged, and excited by the intellectual challenges. One evening, I find my supervisor and express anxiety about being unable to focus. We talk, and I agree to be more patient. We chat about other things. Out of the blue, I come to life, animated by – of all things – the topic of how shopping implicates me in a troubling globalization project. I have, it seems, fallen upon a research topic.*

Three years later, near the end of my PhD, I accept a five-year position at another university, and in less than two years it is converted to a tenure track position. I have become one of them. I have gone from small community-based organizations to universities, from manager to student to faculty member. Long attuned to social issues, I am aware of having a sharper analysis. My circumstances are a combination of well laid plans, dumb luck, and shifts within and beyond my control. My life trajectory can only be mapped in retrospect. This article is one effort to make sense of it all (so far).

Living With/In Tension: Analysis and Discussion

That story grounds the information and analysis that I outline in the following sections. I proceed by identifying and discussing some of the lessons that I have learned about how my experiences relate to a broadly functioning discourse of neoliberalism. The academy, albeit a distinct setting, serves as a microcosm for society-at-large and, in many ways, exemplifies contemporary Western workplaces.

I live and work in both an *environment* and a *state* of tension; in other words, I am surrounded and constituted by tensions. When I began my career as an academic, there were things that I knew, and things that I did not know. As a doctoral student, I learned elements of the scholarly profession – how to conduct and discuss research, develop and deliver courses, and engage in service. As Manley-Casimir, Fenton, McGinn and Shields (2012) comment, other elements, from how to navigate administrative pathways and cultural practices in my workplace to supervising graduate students, are new considerations. On the one hand, I am a novice academic; on the other hand, I am closer to retirement than to the beginning of my

working years. I am portrayed as a highly valued worker at the centre of a “knowledge-based society,” but I recall the metaphor of industrial work employed by Wiebe and Fels (2010) as I see academic work increasingly broken into discrete tasks to be undertaken by a series of workers. I am directed to embrace and enact innovation, within an academic culture which values, above all else, how many publications I have in reputable, refereed journals. As the following discussion illustrates, such tensions imbue my experiences as a new academic and help make sense of the impact of neoliberalism on academic life.

Finding/Losing Home

Since taking up my position, I have left my Vancouver home. Unlike the two French scholars whose autoethnographic writings Reed-Danahay (1997b) discusses, I did not leave home to participate in higher education as a student; rather, I travelled to participate in higher education as a worker. The two publications that Reed-Danahay explores recount the experiences of individuals who left their rural France homes early in the twentieth century to pursue education and become educators. While one account portrays education as a civilizing process which offers people from rural communities the opportunity to move beyond local constraints, the other valorizes rural cultural practices and artifacts as folklore that needs to be defended and preserved. Despite these divergent views of “home,” the two accounts detail the “dual” or “bicultural” (Reed-Danahay, 1997b, p. 135) identities and the sense of otherness that emerged for the original authors.

Curiously, these century-old journeys resemble migrations increasingly associated with globalization, although this issue does not surface in research accounts reviewed above. As Cindi Katz (2001) notes, individuals experience mobility differently. She explains that, although neoliberal globalization is a time of “people, capital, and information moving with greater density, faster and further, it is also through these means that globality comes home and reworks that too” (p. 1215). People change places, and places themselves are changed. Neoliberalism’s focus on the individual over the collective, and financial viability over intellectual or emotional considerations makes it both difficult to remake home once it is lost, and likely that home will be disrupted even if it is not left behind. The Faculty where I work feels different from the home where I studied because it is a different place, but I wonder about the degree to which neoliberalism is dismantling the sense of home for people who might have felt well settled in the places where they worked and studied.

Thinking about my academic home, I see it as a place of “variously belonging, not belonging and partially un-belonging” (McGinn, Grundy, Shields, Manley-Casimir, & Fenton, 2012, p. 14). On the one hand, securing employment in a tenure track position is like buying property in a prime neighbourhood, and my academic home is in a socially enviable location. On the other hand, as a junior scholar, my claim to a rightful place in the academy still seems tentative and tested. Working from a feminist/critical theory paradigm, I am aware that I have moved to a place known for fiscal and social conservatism. I teach courses about work and adult learning, an area replete with scholarship influenced by or referencing Marxist and feminist analyses; however, even the mention of Marx or feminism in classes elicits responses that I interpret as disdainful and dismissive. Moreover, there are times when I recognize and choose to remain uninvolved in messy Faculty and institutional politics, to “un-belong” from my new academic, workplace home as McGinn and her colleagues (2012) put it.

Academic Freedom/Neoliberal Constraints

A basic tenet of academic work is academic freedom. That tenet should extend to graduate students who are becoming scholars, as well as faculty members. In Canada, the major granting agency for social sciences and humanities, including education, is the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). SSHRC is a publicly funded body, which is meant to operate at arm’s length from the government.

In 2009, the Canadian government trumpeted an increase of \$17.5 million for SSHRC-funded graduate scholarships. There was a catch, though: These new scholarships were to be “focused on business-related degrees” (Government of Canada, n.d.). Such political meddling in scholarship exposes another paradox of this era of neoliberal globalization. At a time when governments are seen as diminishing and the so-called free market is seen as expanding in importance and authority, the Canadian government intervened in SSHRC’s decision-making and academics’ freedom, specifically to bolster corporate interests.

That funding intervention clearly was directed at graduate students, and many faculty members’ research pursuits remained funded or fundable. Still, it was clear that SSHRC was encouraging researchers to attend to certain issues and interests in their work, regardless of their fields of study. More recently, the agency revised its funding programs and guidelines, and the following “Priority Areas” were identified: “Aboriginal Research,” “Canadian Environmental Issues,” Digital Economy,” “Innovation, Leadership, and Prosperity,” and “Northern Communities: Towards Social and Economic Prosperity” (SSHRC, 2012b). Even the Environmental Issues priority notes that “practical solutions...related to interactions and interdependencies between the environment, economy, society and culture” (SSHRC, 2012a) will garner special interest. These shifts illustrate how claims made by critical scholars about the preference for vocational, commercializable scholarship (see Bullen, Robb, & Kenway, 2004; Kezar, 2004) are enacted by and for the neoliberal academy.

When I arrived at my new workplace, I knew that I needed to develop a research program that fit with my specialization of Workplace and Adult Learning. I developed a funding proposal that captured my interest in popular culture and consumption, and linked to my instructional focus. I proposed an exploration of television shows featuring medical residents, and focus groups with medical and nursing students about how they connected the shows’ messages to their own education and experiences. Focusing on professional education approached SSHRC’s heightened business-related interest, even if my interest in popular culture seemed to (and was meant to) poke at new funding priorities. I was lucky – that project genuinely interested me, and received funding. Aitken (2010) and Wiebe and Fels (2010) describe concerns about how research interests and achievements contribute to an academic’s reputation and opportunities. How others are being influenced in imagining viable research projects, how I will conceive of future proposals, and how research and knowledge are being guided by neoliberal discourse and a government committed to maintaining a neoliberal course for Canada remain troubling questions with unclear answers.

Surveillance/Invisibility

One of the extensions of neoliberal logic based in the market is the inclination to track and count. I complete an annual report in which I note every publication that I have authored, every presentation that I have delivered, every course that I have taught and every committee that I have served on for that year. The computerized report offers space for me to add comments, which can help contextualize some of the information. In the end, though, the emphasis is on the number of certain products and degree of reputational value that I have added to the Faculty and the institution. Moreover, as my own Prelude above suggests, my life and work in the years preceding my return to graduate school and outside the academy today are marginalized or completely invisible in the construction of my new identity as a scholar.

Another form that I routinely use is the “Application for Approval of Absence from Campus,” which I am directed to complete whenever I leave Calgary for more than a weekend. On that form, I detail how many days I will be away from campus and, unless it is for vacation, contact details while I am away. The form is held by a staff member in the Dean’s office, who forwards an electronic copy to the university’s central Human Resources Office.

In a society which increasingly relies on cameras and security measures to track citizens and visitors alike as they come and go and live their lives, this form becomes an example of how academics are surveilled in

and beyond our work. From our research grants, publications and conference presentations (i.e., our “productivity”), to the number of committees that we serve on and our scores on quantitatively derived student evaluations, to our travels away from campus, whether for leisure or work, tracking tools and practices are put in place. The academy becomes a sort of panopticon, and I am mindful that I might be observed and judged at any moment; moreover, I become compliant in my own surveillance as a worker and a scholar.

The academy is also a space where I come to work with a self-image, and learn about the image of the “me” that I am meant to be(come). W.E.B. Du Bois’ (1903/1994) notion of “double-consciousness, a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (p. 2) comes to mind. Certainly, I do not live with the profound oppression that Du Bois experienced as an African American in the early 1900s; still, academic life routinely subjects me to surveillance and, eventually, self-surveillance.

At the same time that I am surveilled continually, it is not true that “every component of academic life must now be recorded and evaluated” (McGinn et al., 2012, p. 66). I suspect that the official weighting of areas of responsibility in my evaluation is consistent with the “40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% service” (Hellsten et al., 2011, p. 271) formula, even if, in reality, research counts for more than that. What that formula neglects entirely are administrative processes and tasks. These range from completing reports, submitting forms, entering grades, learning how to use software packages and technological platforms, and responding to applicants’ and students’ inquiries about programs and progress. Much of the intellectual work of a scholar – from reading books and articles to engaging in conversations with colleagues to building networks – remains irrelevant to and invisible in existing reporting procedures.

Even in any of the three officially designated areas, much of my labour is rendered invisible. So far, most of my teaching has been done on an online platform, a possibility enabled by technological developments, and bolstered by neoliberal rhetoric of choice and flexibility. Many of the students in the courses that I teach work full-time, and use weekends or evenings as times for their studies. Technology opens the online classroom on a round-the-clock basis and, as the instructor, I am expected by many to be similarly available. There is no companion to the Absence from Campus Form to record my Presence on Campus After-hours and on Weekends.

The Industrialized/Knowledge-based Workplace

The academy is undoubtedly a unique workplace, with a history of status and privilege. Nonetheless, like other workplaces, it can be seen as a microcosm of wider society. Despite the discursive distinction between so-called industrial and knowledge-based work, the implementation of neoliberalism are creating notable similarities between the university and the factory. As I have outlined above, adult and higher education increasingly is subject to a portrayal as crucial supports for economies, rather than resources available to foster citizen engagement or personal development and fulfillment (Bullen, Robb, & Kenway, 2004; Kezar, 2004; Lynch, 2006). Ironically, the academy, which is seen as being at the centre of the alleged knowledge-based society, is in many ways moving closer to the industrial model work, which is supposed to be on the decline.

Even before I returned to graduate school, I became well aware of how class functions in contemporary Canadian universities. Working in the administrative position on campus, I learned about how an entire undergraduate program was built and delivered, largely on the backs of sessional faculty who worked for low pay and with no job security or entitlement to apply for research funds. Typically, course design responsibilities resided with “expert” faculty, while course delivery responsibilities could be passed on to graduate students, alumni or other sessional instructors. That is the model embraced for the new MEd program where I work, and defended by the argument that there is no other choice if academic programs are to become sustainable. Although it extends academic work opportunities to people who do not hold regular academic appointments, it also creates a troubling understanding of academic work as segmented

and compartmentalized. An assembly line approach to teaching emphasizes efficiency, in much the same way as work was organized in the industrial era. Post-secondary institutions become places of the “mass-mediated interests, pleasures, and commercially produced lifestyles” (Giroux, 2002, p. 426) that are held out to students/consumers/citizens.

New Math/Old Formulas

As a graduate student, I might have guessed that not all faculty members across a post-secondary institution are treated equally, but that thought has been confirmed for me since I took up my faculty position. As a member of professoriate, I am the beneficiary of social, cultural and economic privilege, especially in relation to sessional faculty and many non-academic staff members. The university is, after all, a microcosm of larger Canadian society, complete with its own version of a class system, associated with pay, work assignment, access to research funds and other benefits, and security of employment.

In the Faculty of Education where I work, the regular teaching load is six courses per year for members of the professorial class. If we meet expectations for graduate student supervision, our teaching load is reduced to five courses. In addition to teaching and supervision, faculty members are expected to have an active research program and perform institutional, professional and/or community service. Although expectations for our research output and service commitments are similar to those of professorial staff in faculties whose members carry out similar projects, our teaching load is higher than the load of four courses per year in many of them. In effect, our greater teaching load increases our workload by at least 10 per cent.

When I joined the Faculty, the maximum enrollment for the graduate courses that I teach was 20. That figure was increased to 25 and then to 30; it now seems, for all intents and purposes, non-existent, as class size is increased when the cap on registrants in the computer system is reached. Of course, not all courses reach enrollment of 25 or 30, and I have never taught a course of that size; however, I am aware that, should 35 students want to take a course that I am teaching, my class size will balloon accordingly. An extra five students in each course becomes an entire extra course, and our teaching load can increase by another 10 per cent or more.

Although I work at a public university, rhetoric of the need to establish sustainability without relying on government funding is prominent, in full accordance with neoliberal tenets. There is growing pressure to grow professional programs, even when potential supervisors who fit with applicants’ interests and backgrounds are in short supply. These programs bring more dollars into the Faculty, but seem to increase our workloads by intensifying teaching and supervisory demands as we encounter students who struggle with critical reading, writing and thinking. At the same time, we are told that it is crucial to expand research-intensive programs; if we are successful in that aim, our supervisory loads will grow further. Here, then, is the mathematical formula that I have learned: one (Assistant) Professor in Education → one salary, with a workload ≥ 1.25 faculty members.

Closing Thoughts

These stories and analysis contribute to the literature in several ways. They confirm autoethnographers’ assertion about value of personal experiences in connecting the personal to the political. In building the body of autoethnographic work in this area, this article both validates the inclination for junior scholars to be mindful of and reflective on their experiences and the context of them, and encourages ongoing mindfulness and reflexivity. Conceptually, it brings neoliberalism to the foreground, so that discussions of experiences of junior and, for that matter, more senior scholars include the pressures of that ideology in their considerations.

Reed-Danahay (1997b) cautions that it “is important to recognize the existence of multiple native voices, colored by social position, location, and gender” (p. 141). My story is only one story about what is, after all, a diverse cultural group. Like Hellsten and her colleagues (2011), I recognize the challenge of balancing employment-related demands – whether institutionally or self-imposed – with other aspects of my life; however, that is not a new issue for me. Having held generalist positions with not-for-profit organizations, I have worked irregular hours, juggled multiple responsibilities, and faced fuzzy boundaries between employment and other facets of my life. Likewise, Wiebe and Fels’ (2010) recognition that they “are always thinking about tenure” (p. 21) is familiar to me, even though I have not been consumed by the same pursuit. Initially hired into a limited term position, at a relatively late stage in my career, I have not been centrally concerned with the pursuit of tenure.

Still, there are points of commonality between my experience and previous research that extend understanding of how neoliberalism is affecting the academy and academic work, especially for newcomers. Despite rhetoric of the importance of community and interdisciplinarity, competition seems to trump collaboration in building status and advancing my career, and isolates work and workers. Within my Faculty, attempts to develop time and space to foster crucial skills and relationships are juxtaposed with the obscured administrative demands and stringent productivity expectations that have been discussed. When all workers, including faculty, are directed to take on additional, often new tasks, it is not clear whether mentoring and other relational work are “seen as an intensification of work roles or as a welcome opportunity to develop the capacities of co-workers” (Billett, 2003, p. 106).

I have encountered a range of responses to time pressures and learning needs. As a doctoral student, I had a mentor in my supervisor, but not all students were fortunate in that regard and not all students jumped at the chance to be mentored by their supervisors, even when that opportunity was presented. Similarly, since assuming my faculty position, I have met colleagues who share their knowledge, time and insight, and others who seem to guard their time as a precious resource sought by newcomers like me. Insidious as it is, neoliberalism does not have an automatic impact on either junior or senior faculty. This is what enables me to envision some sort of resistance to a narrow vision of higher education (and work more generally), and remain committed to a holistic, critical possibility for academic work and workplace.

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