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Researching the Researcher: the heart and mind in sub-prime times

Elke Emerald & Lorelei Carpenter

Introduction

It starts with a slight scar on my sight. Just a little blurring on the right, at about the two o'clock spot. And I hope that it doesn't spread. Then a little stab in my right temple, my neck tenses and a knife is slipped under my right shoulder blade. An ache spreads gently down my right arm, travelling slowly, like treacle, but it is nothing sweet. And then a clamp tightens on my head. All the while a creeping sense of sickness rises: dizziness and a swimming stomach. Then the lights start flashing, a jagged line of electricity across the top right of my vision and the churning, rolling sickness starts.

All this is familiar, or close enough to familiar, for people who get migraines. It's a pretty standard sort of migraine really, and actually not that severe in the scheme of things. Greasy, salty, hot chips are strangely therapeutic, painkillers might help if I get them in early enough, before my stomach has stopped working, rolling my eyes up to strain point as if I am looking at my forehead sometimes helps, and a dark room and sleep – and quickly. These things must happen quickly, or the pain spreads and settles in, rendering me incapable. These things are strategies to head a migraine off at the pass, but none of them are available in the middle of an interview, especially when I am supposed to be the in-control researcher

As we reflect on this account of a research experience of elke's, we are reminded of the scene related in Zabrodska, Linnell and Laws (2011: 714 -715), where a new lecturer, is summoned to a meeting with her line managers:

The table in Jo's big office is set along one wall. They sit together on the long side. I have my back to the wall on the short side. They look at me as if I am some kind of specimen to be pitied. I am not sure why the meeting has been called...

Perhaps because of this it takes me a few minutes to connect with the topic. Or perhaps I am imagining, in my overtired and desperate state, with the ever-present pain in my skull from the pinched cranial nerve (how shameful to be ill), that they might be going to acknowledge the pressure of the teaching load, to admit that it was a lot to ask that someone could slot instantly into this wild assortment of teaching without the support of teaching materials —“Didn't you bring your own with you?” Kim had once asked — and without the relevant specialist knowledge or the time and space to get it. Even though Kim had also once said first semester was a terrible time to start and Natalie had said, “It's the medical model: throw you in the deep end and see if you can swim.” But no, it's not a case for sympathy. Rather,

apparently, I am “not coping” so it has been decided that— Jo offers this agentless phrase in her sweetest, kindest, and most understanding of voices—until I have sorted out myself and my teaching, I am not permitted to take any more research days. Of course, attending the research workshop cannot be condoned either. That was why she has had to ignore my email. If I choose to go to the workshop, she suggests, oh so sweetly, I will have to take leave without pay. I am stunned. Confused. They don’t want my research output after all? And I am to be punished by no more research “for an indefinite period”?! Not supported, punished!

Both stories tell of the ways, too familiar we might suggest, that the business of being a research academic plays out in our bodies. These both just happen to be stories of dreadful headaches. But how are we to understand this? More to the point: how are we to understand this in a context that does not necessarily have a language to speak it? There has been much talk of the neo-liberal university and Don Watson notes that the all-pervasive language of neo-liberalism is:

...unable to convey any human emotion, including the most basic ones such as happiness, sympathy, greed, envy, love or lust. You cannot tell a joke in this language, or write a poem, or sing a song. It is a language without human provenance or possibility (Watson, 2003: 15).

Just as one cannot admit to emotions within the neo-liberal context, nor can one admit (Oh the shame!) to a ‘failure’ of the body, because as Marginson (2013: 354) argues, ‘Neo-liberal discourse models the world in terms of functioning capitalist markets’ and as such, has little or maybe no language to understand the embodied human experience. For Toni Morrison neo-liberalism is an ‘arrogant pseudo-empirical language crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness’ (Morrison, 1993: 18). Sadly, we heard how this inferiority and hopelessness are beginning to impact people in the neo-liberal academy. In the words of Gayle, a professor, in a faculty leadership position:

Universities don’t do emotions well because it’s all about money, because wellbeing is seen as health and mental health, and all of those sorts of things, so if we name it, it becomes real. (Gayle, senior academic)

Gayle here notices that there is no place on the neo-liberal balance sheet for ‘well-being’ and ‘health’ and ‘mental health’. So a question at the heart of this paper is how do we acknowledge the embodied human experience of academic researchers in a neo-liberal culture? Within this question other questions reside. For example, how can we encounter the rank unfairness of

Zabrodka's et al. (2011) new lecturer; how do we describe the feeling in our bodies when we get our teaching workload on an excel spread sheet, reduced to hours or 'equivalent full-time students', or come away from a research encounter exhausted and ill, or get 'ranked' by whatever metric is currently measuring us – whether that rank is cause for celebration or frustration? How do we think about these things: how do we talk about them?

The context: researchers, stories and neo-liberalism

Our work has been to gather research-stories, that is, the stories of academics who are required to engage in research. Laurel Richardson's *writing-stories* (1997, 2001) or narratives that 'situate [her] sociological work in academic, disciplinary, community and familial contexts' (2001: 34) inform our work. We gather stories that situate researchers in their social, political, personal and professional contexts to learn about being a researcher at this particular historical moment. Unsurprisingly, although we did not set out to investigate the impact of neo-liberalism *per se*, the stories we heard quickly turned to the rapidly changing university environment brought about by neo-liberal policy changes since the 1980's. These stories, our field texts, often tell of the embodied experience of these changes. Further, these stories sit uneasily within the neo liberal context which 'makes emotion, humour, poetry, song, a passion for a life of the intellect unthinkable' (Davies, 2005: 7). We heard a lot about emotion, passion and the 'life of the intellect'. We also recognize that stories are not experience; they are people's accounts of experience, their *telling* of it, and that telling may change from one telling to the next. Even so, through the stories we often get some access to the meanings that people attach to events. In our research we use these accounts of the feelings and emotions of our participants as insight into current university life. We think this is part of what Brene Brown meant by stories as 'data with soul' (2012: 252).

Terms or phrases that resemble 'neo-liberal policy change' (as we used above) have become something of a shorthand to describe a range of changes that flow from the reconception of public functions using financial rationale and business templates (Marginson, 2013). Knowledge and education have become commodities, to be sold, traded and consumed. In reference to universities, Giroux (2002: 428) has described neo-liberalism as 'the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment' which has reduced 'higher education to the handmaiden of corporate culture' (p.432) through 'the corrosive effects of the influence of corporate power' (p.437). In the introduction to *Hard labour?* (Fitzgerald, White & Gunter, 2012: 1) Tanya Fitzgerald describes neo-liberalism as a period of 'intense turmoil and change'. At a macro level, these changes have been transformations to institutional norms and academic values. These

changes have intensified the environment of higher education and reshaped the performance of scholarly identity (White 2012). Cribb and Gewirtz (2013) argue that these transformations have produced the hollowed-out university: a place where increased marketing and corporatization, as well as an ethos of competition and success, have superseded a community of learners whose purpose is to act for the public good. The stories that our participants related to us are situated in this macro-context of the consumerism, calibration, regulation and performance objectives of market driven universities.

At a micro level, which we explore in this paper, Fitzgerald (2012: 139) rather disturbingly points out that 'academics are fast becoming the marginal workers within [higher education] institutions'. Academic researchers are expected to manage the pragmatics of the new academic scene whilst maintaining research energy, and even passion. This, despite the pressures of new managerialism's focus on conformity to forms of efficiency, external accountability and monitoring that do not, in many researchers lived experience, support research. The result is that researchers strive to engage in research that manages to fulfill, bypass or subvert the requirements of the market driven university system while resolving the apparent losses of autonomy, academic freedom, support, security and academic dignity. To hear the stories of academic researchers, we asked our participants a naive question: 'What is it like to be a researcher in a University right now?' We asked this question of Julie White's 'disposable academics' (2012: 50); short term and casualised staff with insecure teaching or research contracts. These were mostly doctoral students, negotiating a space between their commitment and passion for research and the institution's pressure for a 'timely completion'. We also asked White's (2012: 48) 'academic infantry'; the mid-career researchers who have lived and felt the labour intensification of recent times. We also asked senior academics, established professors with established research histories and the security (they hope) of a steady track record and a list of external grants. So far, we have heard stories from academics in Australia, Aotearoa/NZ and the UK. These stories are not simple.

We heard emotional and vulnerable stories, stories of personal investment, and emotionally and physically risky and dangerous encounters. We learnt something of the complex business of negotiating personal and professional subjectivities, or, in other terms, of sculpting a research identity.

The stories we visit in this paper resonate with Brown's (2012) personal and emotional accounts. As well they demonstrate Laurel Richardson's (2001) reminder that stories are not only personal but also political. It is not our task here to unpack the well-established argument that 'the personal is political' and indeed, 'the political is personal'. We will simply echo Laurel

Richardson (2012: 34) in noting that the research-stories we heard are influenced by ‘socio-political, familial and academic climates’.

In this paper we consider a little of the social, political, personal and professional contexts of research as experienced by our participants. To do that we discuss some of the embodied experiences of our participants as told in their stories by sharing some of the themes that arose within the stories: themes of personal and emotional investment, rejection, researcher identity and positive engagement.

Personal and emotional investment

We heard stories that told us that research is more than just a task to academic researchers: we heard that research is a lifestyle, an emotional engagement and a matter of identity. Gayle, a research active senior academic, saw research as part of her academic lifestyle:

I think you need to be clear that research is not a task so much but it is actually part of our lifestyle as academics. (Gayle, senior academic)

Anne, a mid-career researcher, recognized her personal emotional investment in research:

There's a whole chunk of me in everything I write because I don't like writing that much. (Anne, mid-career academic)

Emma clearly understood the embodied price of the emotional investment she made to research:

I mean it's excruciating to put your stuff out there and I've had lots of conferences where I could hardly get to my session because I felt so physically sick. (Emma, senior academic)

Emma's response might be understandable perhaps from a doctoral candidate, still finding her way, but a little more surprising from this established professor with a long list of publications and research grants.

Andrew developed survival strategies to cope with the emotional toll of engaging in research:

Well, I think to cope in higher education you can't have the emotional aspect.

But to almost create a detachment from one's emotion, emotional response, is how that practice becomes enacted ... ultimately what we're doing is running away from ever dealing with that which we might have observed, experienced, learnt during the research. I've automatically put in the protectors not to become relationally or emotionally involved with my subjects, my data. (Andrew, mid-career academic)

Fiona developed strategies to manage the on-the-spot stressors of research:

I would often, as part of my rituals before conducting interviews, I would turn up a little bit early and go to the bathroom and just sit in the toilet cubicle and just breathe and try and calm myself. (Fiona, Early Career academic /PhD candidate)

These extracts show us something of the emotional journey that research can entail, at the various points from doing interviews (Fiona) to publishing and presenting (Emma and Anne). These emotions are felt in these researchers' bodies as physical sickness (Emma) or panic (Fiona 'calm myself'). We see for these researchers a considerable personal investment in research, a commitment of the self as heart, mind, and body.

Rejection

Many participants spoke to us about rejection. So much so, that rejection emerged as a distinct aspect of the emotional experience. The issue of rejection was evident regardless of the status of the researcher. Andrew listed his professional life as opportunities to experience failure and rejection:

...being an academic is like putting yourself up for failure every single day because there will be that grant knockback, there will be the publication knockback, there will be a promotion application knockback, an award knocked back. Your student evaluations of courses, open ended questions that are largely knockbacks. Highly critical. So you spend your career dealing with knockbacks, negative criticism. (Andrew, mid-career academic)

Emma spoke of the toll of those rejections:

It took me ages to get the courage up to write it and to put myself out there for rejection. But that took about a year, you know, just of sending it out and sending it back and sending it out and sending it back and I just felt withered, withered inside for getting those rejections. (Emma, senior academic)

Andrew realized he needed to be strategic in coping with rejection:

It's a rejection, it's a rejection. So for me I've got to remember, but it takes me time. It's rejection of the work or the ideas, it's not a rejection of *me* as a person. But that's quite hard to separate. (Andrew, mid-career academic)

As Emma and Andrew articulate, the business of research makes one available to rejection on many fronts and, as much as Andrew tries to separate himself from the rejection, these failures can be a deeply experienced emotional and bodily blow.

Research(er) identity

All of our participants expressed some form of commitment to research that framed research as an element of their identity. For example, Gayle (above) used the term 'lifestyle' and Anne here feels that she is revealing something of herself.

It's a bit scary because I'm revealing myself through my work. Well, it means that people get some insight into the way you think. I don't think that's such a bad thing, but it's something you don't do that often, that's all. I don't think we often put the personal into the publication. (Anne, mid-career academic)

Positive engagement

While eloquent on the topic of the challenges of research, it is important to recognise that participants expressed a positive engagement, an excitement and satisfaction, which often provided adequate incentive to overcome the challenges that confronted them.

But it's more fun than it's not. For me, once I've got something written, I actually usually quite enjoy presenting it. (Emma, senior academic)

I guess what really gets me excited is those moments of creativity and like when things cross and you get neurons firing and get really excited about it.

(Laine, Early Career academic /PhD candidate)

Why do we do things that actually put us in those situations where we're at risk, we're vulnerable? Because it makes me happy. I think there's that strange paradox about fulfilling yourself, that the struggle is actually part of the process and then coming out the other side. (Anne, mid-career academic)

I love the act of research, of finding out, the efficacy of theories, the efficacy of ideas and the outcomes for practice. I'd even get back into stats if that's what it took! The research is wonderful, I love it – it's the institution that makes it hard. (Bridget, mid-career academic)

These participants use strongly emotional words to express their positive experiences of research; fun, excited, happy and love, just as we have heard strong expression of the emotional and bodily challenges of research.

Discussion: the hearts, minds and bodies of researchers

These snippets, although only small windows on our participants experience, give us some insight into the ways that research plays out in the hearts, minds and bodies of researchers. Our participants talked of their emotional and personal engagement as researchers and also the impact of their negotiations to find success of some sort in their research in the university context. As we noted above, we did not set out to research the 'neoliberal context' *per se*, but as

soon as people started telling their story, the manifestations of our 'sub-prime' context became a topic. The socio-political and academic climate of our participants reflected, in the main, the consequence of the regulatory functions (Yvonna S. Lincoln (2011) of the accountability measures of corporatized universities. The increasing use of performance metrics changes the purpose and role of research. Frank Furedi (2006: 77) argues that one of the many roles of the university 'is to question conventional truths' and he notes that the 'pursuit of ideas has always demanded that intellectuals question the sacred and mention the unmentionable'. Yet the stories we heard gave voice to a growing *loss* of academic freedom within the struggle to meet the demands of the encroaching performance indicators. This loss can be heard in Gayle's words:

We've lost flexibility. I've had to stop and think more about research and think about how I do research rather than just saying, well, this is a great idea, let's do it. Now having to think, well, it's a great idea but how does it meet the requirements. (Gayle, senior academic)

Gayle finds that she tailors her research to the University's performance requirements rather than following an agenda driven purely by the research. Ball (2003) asks us to resist these 'terrors of performativity'. That is, to resist doing what is expected of us simply as a means to satisfy performance benchmarks, but to do those things that may not be measurable but are ethically and intellectually rewarding. This is a complex task and one that many committed researchers, including Gayle, seek to do amongst the spreadsheets and performance indicators. Kris, a mid-career researcher, struggles; she finds that for her it is a matter of dealing with the pragmatics of achieving a certain number of publications. The result for Kris is a piecemeal publications record rather than a coherent research program that she can have commitment to and be proud of:

I just live for my 20 per cent a week research allocation. Each you know, semester one, I'll do this publication. Semester two, I'll do that publication. So you're just kind of producing chapters for books, or papers that are in your interest, but in terms of a big project that could have an impact and a collection of people that could be really nice to work with, it just hasn't happened. We got the ERA research assessment exercise, and it literally was, I need to get my four papers, which journals shall I go to? Which of the citations? Then it's like, 'I've got my four journals now' so I've done my job, it's awful. (Kris, mid-career academic)

Here Kris laments the 'awfulness' of her pragmatic approach to simply getting publications. She has been reduced to the simple metrics, her passion and commitment for her work for young

people was clearly evident when she told us her story, yet she feels hopeless or helpless in the face of the necessity of compliance. In essence, we can hear the compliance that drives her:

I think, what research and writing can I get done in one semester? I think in one semester frameworks. (Kris, mid-career academic)

Hans de Bruijn (2002: 581) notes what he calls 'game playing'. That is, the various strategic moves developed (by individuals or organisations) to register appropriate performance by whatever measure. Game playing is an unintended consequence of performance measurement regimes (presumably unintended by those who institute the regimes, often very deliberate and strategic moves by those enacting them). Gayle tailors her research to the requirements of the university and funding bodies. Kris has adopted a strategy to get the necessary numbers for her publications record. She strives to maintain quality in each of her publications, but her strategy will not necessarily deliver a long term benefit in terms of a coherent body of contribution to knowledge, nor is it maintaining her passion for her research. A drive for quantity over quality is another unintended outcome of the marketization of knowledge (Klieve, Hay and Smith 2013). This is reflected in Emma's words:

.... the publication environment has got more relentless since I started and that's made life very much tougher for people, and, I think publication's really important in order to get those ideas out and circulating. But the kind of tick-the-box version of publication, I think, is a very negative consequence of where we are. (Emma, senior academic)

Emma's 'tick-the-box' publication refers to the drive to just get a publication that meets performance criteria, which may not necessarily meet one's own criteria of quality, or depth of research or ideal contribution to knowledge. Emma seems to be recognizing this as a strategy that individuals might employ in response to 'where we are', that is, current university conditions. As one of the respondent's in Klieve, Hay and Smith's (2013) research put it:

In many ways its [the University's] policies and procedures disadvantage staff for whom quality and reputation is important and reward those that simply play the game. (Klieve, Hay and Smith, 2013)

In a metrics driven work environment, many academics find they are unable to heed Frank Furedi's (2006: 77) call and 'question the sacred and mention the unmentionable'. But rather, like Gayle and Kris, find strategic ways to conform to the performative requirements of neo-liberalism. In doing so, they enact the neo-liberal project of conformity (Marginson, 2013), and may find themselves in the dilemma articulated by Davies (2005: 4) : '... this discourse of neo-liberalism is turning us into something we do not want to be'.

The logic and language of neo-liberalism has no means of self-reflection or critique, no means to look back at the wider context. Giroux (2013) reminds us that for neoliberalism, the only viable measure of the good life is profit, while civic engagement and the public spheres devoted to the common good are viewed by many politicians and their publics as a hindrance to the goals of a market-driven society. Hence, unlike the liberal project of critique (Marginson, 2013), neo-liberalism has no language of critique or dissent. The only critique available is individuated. Our struggles are framed as our own failure in some way. We see this played out in participants' comments about rejection and in Zabrodska et al's (2011) participant who discovered that, as far as her line managers were concerned, it was she who was 'not coping', rather than the context which was making undue demands, and hence she would be 'punished' by a withdrawal of her research time. As Zabrodska et al. point out in this example, neo-liberal discourse attributes shortcomings and ineffectiveness not on its own ideology but rather on individuals. As such, we can be held personally responsible for the way in which we manage the stressors of performativity and marketization. So not only do our participants report emotional and bodily pressures and stressors, but further, they do this in a context in which the only explanation on offer is their own inadequacy.

As we noted above, participants reported their positive engagement with research too – fun, excitement, happiness and even love. We cannot overlook these. However, our question is, how long can this payoff support the dwindling energies of researchers in a context that has no language for 'wellbeing and health and mental health'? We recognize too that these participants are not simply compliant dupes. Strategies such as Gayle's and Kris' can be heard as some form of resistance, although ultimately such acts may play out as compliance. Gayle's tone of resignation and Kris' bewilderment as she spoke of the 'awfulness' of her publication strategy revealed something of their conflicting emotions as they struggled to find ways to negotiate this space. This struggle to meet the demands of accountability can have a negative effect on researchers. Andrew questions the energy he has for this endeavor:

But when you're having to put so many publications out, and to be regularly rejected or not getting it, it tires one, it wears one out, makes me sort of go, is it worth the investment of time and energy at the moment? (Andrew, mid-career academic)

In Andrew's case, as a mid-career researcher, he faces the choice of either pursuing his career at the expense of depleting his emotional energy and enthusiasm for research or abandoning attempts to further his academic career. Similarly, a short time after Kris was interviewed she sent an email indicating her form of resistance is to remove herself altogether:

Work has been shocking. I don't like the new culture that is developing in our school. I'm considering one more year and then making a bit of a life change. (Kris, mid-career academic)

Her life change entailed leaving the academy, pursuing further study and embarking on a completely new career.

Emily, a mid-career researcher, has responded to Ball's (2003) request to resist the 'terrors of performativity' and recognizes the consequences for her career.

In a sense, I am a wash-up. I guess I'd be called 'mid-career'. I've been sitting at the top of SL for an age. If I'd made a concerted effort for Ass Pro maybe 5 or 6 years ago I *might* have got it on service and teaching and just OK publishing – but the bar has galloped over the horizon while I was busy with being a mother and managing life disasters. My colleagues who started at the same time as me are professors now – men – one even said to me 'well, I have a wife'. And I don't. Well, blah blah, we know what that means, gender politics etc, 'the Sunday research' model. But it's not just that. I just don't do work that gets grants and have never figured out how to. Say I really got in to the game and went hard now, grants, publications etc, I might break through to Ass Pro – but I just don't think I have the heart for it – I experience these metrics as punitive not supportive. And I know some of these young guns driving themselves mad to progress – be a Professor by 40, all that, have no respect for me. That's ok, that's their thing. And the other thing, if I push for what gets called leadership positions – which equals management, I might well have to actively enact the metric bastardry against my colleagues. I can't do that. I've had a tiny, tiny taste of that and I don't have the spirit for it. On my day of reckoning, I'll not be calling on the Nuremberg defense. Jesus! I'll hate myself if I ever do that. *Hate myself. Holy fuck!* What is the difference between that and herding my neighbour onto a train to Auschwitz, flicking the on switch on the gas. Seriously, no, *seriously*. It's just the other end of the same fucking piece of string. That's what I am thinking.

(Emily, mid-career academic)

Emily's reflective and reflexive turn here again recalls Davies (2005), to paraphrase, Emily resists being turned into something she does not want to be. Emily sees the game clearly and, for her, resistance comes, quite literally, at a price. On this trajectory she realizes she "will be retiring on considerably less superannuation than these young guns". (Emily, mid-career academic)

Although most of the stories above may seem drear it is important that they are told and heard. It is in the sharing of such stories that a community is found. Community can be the first step to collectivity.

Henry A. Giroux (2013) reminds us to consider Said's pedagogy of wakefulness (2000) which urges us to consider critical thinking/literacy not merely as a tick-a-box competency in our student-attributes, but as an act of interpretation linked to the possibility of intervention in the world. Said reminds us that we need to connect our personal stories with the public story. Doing so protects us to some degree from the personal shattering that we experience when we individuate and isolate our rejections and 'failures' and also helps us see a way ahead in taking on Giroux's version of scholarship as to 'unsettle power, challenge consensus and trouble common sense' (Giroux, 2013: 77).

Conclusion

The genesis of our paper was in a simple question posed to a range of senior, mid-career and early career academics. We wanted to understand the impact of research on the researcher. Quickly, because that's what people talked about, this project became about the impact of the current managerial climate on the lived experiences of academics. Disturbingly the academics we spoke with experienced varying degrees of loss of autonomy, academic freedom, support, security and academic dignity which resulted from institutional emphasis on efficiency, external accountability and monitoring. Yet despite the elevation of performance over academic inquiry and the challenges of the current marketised context, many researchers expressed their positive engagement and commitment to continued research and academic work.

We find that our work has raised many questions for us and provided few answers. In particular, we wonder whether there is a place in the neo-liberal academy to notice the impact of research on researchers, language it and make that impact matter, dare we say, make it count. We wonder whether many of our participants can find a place in the neo-liberal academy without sacrificing their commitment to justice, to critical questioning and understanding of our world. Our questions are important because we need to understand what support academics need to withstand the voices of critique, rejection and failure that are becoming louder within the neo-liberal context. With support, academics can become confident to talk back to the emotional and bodily stressors of performativity and marketization whilst acting for the public good.

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Biographical Details

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