



Academic identities and sense of place: A collaborative autoethnography in the neoliberal university

Management Learning

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/13505076211006543

journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq

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Abstract

Neoliberalism, precarious jobs, and control of work have multiple effects on academic identities as our allegiances to valued social groups and our connections to meaningful locations are challenged. While identities in neoliberal universities have received increasing research attention, sense of place has passed unnoticed in the literature. We engage with collaborative autoethnography and contribute to the literature in two ways. First, we show that while academic identities are put into motion by the neoliberal regime, they are constructed through mundane constellations of places and social entities. Second, we elucidate how academic identities today are characterized by restlessness and how academics use place and time to find meaning for themselves and their work. We propose a form of criticism to neoliberal universities that is sensitive to positionalities and places and offer ideas on how to build shared understandings that help us survive in the face of neoliberal standards of academic “excellence.”

Keywords

Academic identity, collaborative autoethnography, identity, neoliberalism, place, university

Introduction

We, the three authors of this paper, are academics in different organizational positions and life stages. We share the sensation that our academic identities cannot escape places although our work in neoliberal universities appears to be placeless. This paper offers a collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2012) where we discuss and theorize our academic identities and how they were challenged during and after our affiliation with a university undergoing a merger and a campus relocation. We conceive identities as our subjectively but socially constructed understandings of who we were, are, and desire to become (Brown, 2015), and in contributing to the critical literature, we elucidate how places and social groups intertwine in how identities evolve over time. While the

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neoliberal ethos may be elusive in our lives, our autoethnographic stories demonstrate the influence that places and time orientations as well as social entities have when we construct our identities as academics. Our collaborative inquiry helps highlight different forms in which identities are constructed: as progressing, as staying afloat, and as retaining purpose.

It is well established that in contemporary universities neoliberalism reigns, jobs are precarious, and work is meticulously controlled, and that this has profound effects on academic identities (Ashcraft, 2017, 2018; Bristow et al., 2017; Crozier and Woolnough, 2020; Gill, 2009; Gill and Donaghue, 2016; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Lund and Tienari, 2019; Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013). Neoliberalism refers to a political doctrine and form of government premised on the universalization of social relations based on the “free” market. A competitive ethos has taken over the university (Kallio et al., 2016) and academic work is controlled and evaluated in narrow ways (Sousa et al., 2010). Ashcraft (2017: 37) provokes us by saying that “you hustle among the tenants and habitats of a Neoliberal U whose projects include an increasingly neoliberal you.” Managerialist and marketized policies and practices make the “neoliberal us” work more and they force us to manage (for) ourselves. However, some are better equipped than others to enact the “right” identities in the precarious conditions (Lund and Tienari, 2019).

Our identities as academics are related to memberships in social entities such as academia, university, department, and research group (cf. Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Although not explicitly discussed in extant research, we suggest that academic identities are also based on place identities that convey “personal attachment to geographically locatable places” (Grey and O’Toole, 2020: 206) through which we acquire “a sense of belonging and purpose which gives meaning” to our lives (Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983: 60). Academic identities in universities under transformation have received research attention from the perspectives of insecurity (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013), meaninglessness (Gill and Donaghue, 2016) and love (Knights and Clarke, 2014) as well as age (Crozier and Woolnough, 2020) and scholarly potential (Lund and Tienari, 2019). Emotions such as resentment (Ashcraft, 2017) and fear (Jones et al., 2020; Ratle et al., 2020) are argued to describe the experiences of academics today. Nurturing an academic identity that subverts dominant practices and institutions, criticizes and resists them, is difficult but not impossible (Ashcraft, 2017; Bristow et al., 2017). Nevertheless, we are encouraged to practice analytical detachment from local ways of knowing (Parker and Weik, 2014) as we are forced to embrace universal standards of “excellence” (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016).

In the neoliberal university, our place and social identities are arguably under threat. Neoliberalism means that academics in different locations across the world produce knowledge in conditions that are remarkably similar: we are pressured to do impactful research, write it up in standardized ways in the English language, and to target our work in specific journals (Boussebaa and Tienari, 2021). In meeting the standards of excellence, we collaborate with academics in other universities and countries as we are rewarded for working with those affiliated in “top” institutions in our field (Lund and Tienari, 2019). It seems that place has become a minor concern or even irrelevant for the aspiring and successful academic. Not surprisingly, then, senses of gaining and losing places and their connections to social identities and time have passed unnoticed in critical research (Baldry and Barnes, 2012). This is problematic because academics cannot escape places but operate in social *and* spatial environments that transcend the boundaries of the university.

We ask the question: how and why does a sense of place influence construction of academic identities in the neoliberal university? We explore how identities are related to places and social groups and how they are in flux; how we are differently positioned to take up opportunities in the neoliberal university; and how we can raise our voices together to question the status quo.

Setting the scene: The Aalto University merger

The Aalto University merger in Finland has profoundly influenced our academic identities. Merging the Helsinki University of Technology (HUT), the Helsinki School of Economics (HSE), and the University of Art and Design (UAD) was a bold initiative with an aspiration to become “world class” (Aula and Tienari, 2011). In 2010, the new Aalto University became a legal entity. In 2018–2019, a major step was taken in the merger process when all operations of the former HSE and UAD were transferred to the campus of the former HUT in Otaniemi, some 10 km away from Helsinki, the Finnish capital, in the adjoining city of Espoo. We all worked at Aalto but ended up leaving. Emma, a junior female scholar, moved to a tenure track position in another business school. Marko, a senior male scholar, was dismissed and ended up as a project researcher in this same business school. Janne, a senior male scholar, got a professor position there already 3 years earlier.

The Aalto University merger is illuminative of the neoliberal ethos that characterizes contemporary academia across the Global North. In the Finnish higher education system, government steering and the interests of industry and business emphasize the impact of the university in society (Aarrevaara et al., 2009). This steering became possible with the new Universities Act that came into force in 2010. The Aalto University merger was decided on already in 2007, and it became the showcase in reforming the Finnish higher education sector to meet global standards of excellence. While the three merging universities were state owned, Aalto University is governed by a foundation under private law. The “privatized” university developed a forward-looking strategy, restructured its operations to serve a new, innovative and interdisciplinary brand, and introduced an academic tenure track career system to attract top talent from across the world (Tienari et al., 2016). While those who felt that the merger was not threatening and that it was managed in a fair manner were able to identify better with the new university, many experienced a sense of threat and loss (Edwards et al., 2017). Aalto’s targets of excellence were ambitious and openly different from those of the three legacy universities. When Aalto implemented its “one campus” strategy in 2018–2019 the relocation was, as we shall see, related to social and temporal aspects of identities as well as to spaces and places.

The making of Aalto University in Finland is indicative of how neoliberalism transforms academia. It materializes in complex, variable, and often contradictory adaptations, but in the Global North and beyond it turns universities to resemble business enterprises where market logic dominates (Ashcraft, 2017). As an ideological force, neoliberalism comprises marketization and managerialism. Marketization means that universities are expected to compete against each other nationally and globally in attracting the “best” students and scholars as well as funding from the market, and to deliver a high-quality service (Collini, 2017). With marketization comes managerialism where work in universities is determined by the strategic goals that management sets, where it allocates resources, and how it controls that the goals of the organization are pursued effectively (Chandler et al., 2002; Sousa et al., 2010). Performance measurements—or “targets and terror”—become powerful mechanisms for the expansion of managerial power and autocratic governance in the neoliberal university (McCann et al., 2020).

The neoliberal university and identities

Behind the neoliberal façade (Lund Dean et al., 2020), academic work and identities are changing. The United Kingdom is a forerunner in Europe in policy reforms that embraced market discourse (Fairclough, 1993) and led to “commodification” (Willmott, 1995) and “McDonaldization” of higher education (Parker and Jary, 1995). Market-driven managerialist reforms resulted in insecurity

(Chandler et al., 2002; Knights and Clarke, 2014), but also the creation of spaces where support and solidarity could be enacted (Bowes-Catton et al., 2020). It also led to collective resistance as the University and College Union (UCU) ran a series of strikes in 2018–2020. While in 2018 the dispute in the UK was over proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme, in 2019–2020 strike action also included disputes over pay, workload, and casualization of university jobs.

Academics' experiences of insecurity are echoed in countries such as Finland where neoliberalism is a more recent phenomenon. As a Nordic country, Finland prides itself on its high level of education available to all citizens regardless of wealth or family background. However, "free market" policies and practices challenge the tenets of the Finnish welfare state and its democratic approach to higher education (Aarrevaara et al., 2009). This has profound effects on how academics see themselves in the new competitive space (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013). Finland is a member state of the European Union, and EU policies accentuate standardized reforms in higher education in terms of degree structures.

The crux of the matter is that academics at Aalto University in Finland, as elsewhere, are now forced to deal with insecurities and to manage their identities. This has been put into motion by the neoliberal regime. We are programed to be ambitious and to strive for excellence in a "game" of producing publications for prestigious journals (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020). While an intensified individualization of responsibility, success, and failure is crucial to the neoliberal constellation in academia, individualized accountability induces the ironic effect of homogenizing faculty into measurable "stable uniform entities" (Ashcraft, 2017: 39; Davies and Bansel, 2010). Standards of excellence inform our choices—but to stand out from the crowd we must brand ourselves to have high potential (Lund and Tienari, 2019). New externally exposed quantitative targets and metrics conflict with more traditional academic values such as autonomy and belonging to a community (and a place) (Kallio et al., 2016). To "escape" the hegemonic regime, it seems, one would have to have a secure organizational position for life or leave the university altogether. What is at stake is the erosion of traditional academic ethos (Kallio et al., 2016) and identity (Gill and Donaghue, 2016).

Our identities are constructed and enacted in relation to other people (Kenny et al., 2011) and material objects such as buildings and workspaces (Baldry and Barnes, 2012; Hancock and Spicer, 2010). Norms regarding the "ideal" academic discussed above shape our identities and how we can achieve a sense of coherence, confidence, and credibility (Crozier and Woolnough, 2020; Lund and Tienari, 2019). At the same time, it is evident that commitment to our academic work (and a sense of caring) keeps us going despite insecurity and stress (Clarke et al., 2012; Knights and Clarke, 2014). As such, the notion of academic community is changing but it is arguably still relevant.

Academic identities are based on our sense of who we are (and were and desire to become) and on our perceived membership in social groups we consider relevant (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013). When identifying as part of a group (Tajfel and Turner, 1985), we feel and act like an "in-group" member by sharing its values, norms, beliefs, and behavior (Stets and Burke, 2000). When social group identity is salient, we act in accordance with its norms and goals (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007). When these norms and goals are determined by the neoliberal agenda, we are sucked into the "game" of performing (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020). We identify with our research group, department, university, and/or the international academic community—but in complex ways that are not likely to be coherent and static.

In discussing the constraints of neoliberal academia, Ashcraft (2017: 37) laments that "it is in the reluctance to digest our own plate, and the shared heartburn of trying to do so, that we bump up against the affective limits of available modes of criticism." Perhaps this is an elegant way of saying that criticizing the neoliberal regime is difficult. While critical discussion has centered around global standards of excellence and how they condition academic work and identities locally, we argue that sense of place has passed unnoticed in the discussion. While a shared sense of place is

arguably at the heart of academic communities, it is challenged by the neoliberal regime. Hence, we take a closer look at place and the influence it has in shaping our academic identities.

Identities and places: Profound connections

Our lives are in many ways territorial and we make claims on our (assumed) control of spaces and places as organizational members (Brown et al., 2005). For us, space refers to the material world of buildings and workspaces as well as to the movements and performances that take place in them (Stephenson et al., 2020). Place is a location that we make meaningful (Cresswell, 2004: 7). Our identities (including identifying with social groups) are related to spaces and places, as we work remotely from home or commute to the university, enter its buildings, work in a dedicated (or not) office space, teach in lecture halls, and encounter people in open spaces, rooms, and hallways. Our spatial connections matter in relation to our identities: “symbiotic relationships” between places and identities (Grey and O’Toole, 2020) and “powerful dynamic reciprocal connections between space and individual and organizational identities” (Hirst and Humphreys, 2020: 699) have received attention in organization and management studies. This includes spaces and places that enable, facilitate, or compel identity change in ways that are not necessarily congruent with intentions of organizational decision-makers (Courpasson et al., 2017; Taylor and Spicer, 2007).

The concept of place identity (Grey and O’Toole, 2020; Proshansky et al., 1983; Rooney et al., 2010) offers new ways for studying academic identities in neoliberal universities. While social identity theory has underplayed the importance of place identity in organizations (see, however, e.g. Elsbach, 2003), we assume that place identity operates as a component of social identity, that our identification with places influences our perceptions of the university and the way it organizes us, and that connections between the self and physical settings tend to be especially meaningful for those of us who have extensive “place histories” (Rooney et al., 2010). This relates, among other things, to how spaces are redesigned and allocated, and how these redesigned spaces are (not) conceived as places by academics (Baldry and Barnes, 2012; Berti et al., 2018; Hancock and Spicer, 2010).

An inherent aspect of (organizational) place is its people; the social interaction that takes place there and the relations that are forged and broken. Places are products of relations and interaction; they are “never finished” but constantly in the making (Massey, 2005: 9). When reflecting on organizational members’ relationships to places, then, it is important to note that identities are constituted by spatially embedded and embodied social action (Hirst and Humphreys, 2020). Our understanding of places thus extends far beyond buildings and workspaces in neoliberal universities.

Aalto University is an example of neoliberal higher education institutions where social entities and spaces—buildings and workplace designs—aim to support what are seen by top management as new ways of doing academic work. Neoliberalism thus leaves its mark on the physical surroundings of the university. Hancock and Spicer (2010) argue that architecture and interior design represent a “technology of interpellation” that encourages and privileges certain forms of identity. New striking buildings and their meeting places solidify an identity for the university and for those working in it. At Aalto, the “one campus” strategy and new buildings and space designs in Otaniemi—next door to the “Finnish Silicon Valley” with headquarters of multinational corporations, high technology start-ups, and growth firms—aim to encourage interdisciplinary encounters and innovation, thus organizing the social side of our identities. Aalto offers new spaces for academics but how spaces are turned into places, or meaningful locations (Cresswell, 2004), remains an open question. Grand space designs are combined with placeless work: it is argued that in neoliberal universities “the less loyalty and solidarity” to their local community academics show, “the better their prospects will be” (Parker and Weik, 2014: 174). This is because the “game” of performing (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020) is detached from specific spaces and places.

Flows of ideas, mutual creativity, and synergies seem to be universal arguments for reshaping university buildings and workspaces today, despite the lack of supporting research evidence for such outcomes (Baldry and Barnes, 2012: 234). At Aalto, buildings and workspaces are also reshaped to enable identification with the new university. Overall, space is used as a managerial tool and managing space becomes an exercise of power. In our collaborative autoethnography, we explore how neoliberal space management in academia can lead to displacement as well as placement; exclusion as well as inclusion.

Engaging with collaborative autoethnography

We, the three authors of this paper, share the idea that people and places are crucial for our academic identities. We each have a long-standing relationship with Aalto University, having worked there for years, but we have all left Aalto to take up positions in Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki (Emma and Marko in 2020 and Janne in 2016). Emma is a junior female scholar (assistant professor), while Marko and Janne are senior male scholars, albeit in different organizational positions. Marko is a project researcher and Janne a professor. For purposes of generating texts on our experiences in the predecessors of Aalto University, the merger, and the decision to concentrate all operations in a single campus, we engaged with collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2012). This includes joint reflection and critique of personal stories as well as revisiting them through a given conceptual and theoretical lens (Geist-Martin et al., 2010). Following Ashcraft (2018: 8), we “promote a way of turning inward that simultaneously enhances our skill at turning outward.” We attempt to show how place-based and social identities are related in neoliberal universities and how their intersections have profound effects on how academic identities are put into motion, evolve, or stagnate.

Autoethnographies are increasingly common in critical studies of universities, academic work, and identities. Doctoral researchers (Forber-Pratt, 2015; Prasad, 2013; Weatherall, 2019) and academics who are mothers (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Riad, 2007) have reflected on their experiences. “Unusual” academic career trajectories have been studied (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017), academic writing has been explored (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018), the question of language and academic identity has been scrutinized (Tienari, 2019), and uncomfortable experiences in academic conferences have been unpacked (Bell and King, 2010). While Zawadzki and Jensen (2020) explored bullying of young academics in the neoliberal university through “co-authored analytic autoethnography,” Cruz et al. (2020) reflected on the five authors’ lived experiences as “foreign workers in the U.S. academy.” The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on academics’ experiences have helped generate a wealth of new autoethnographic work. The unusual circumstances of our lives have prompted academics to “collaboratively wonder about time” (Bolander and Smith, 2020), to reflect on liminal spaces and scholarly identity (Lee, 2020), and to envision alternative ways of knowing and forms of self-expression (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2020).

Autoethnographies enable us to illuminate social phenomena, experiences, and identities that would be difficult to capture otherwise (McDonald, 2016; Tienari, 2019). Collaborative autoethnographies encourage us to do this together and they offer a way to go beyond individual storytelling and reflection. The Aalto University merger and the campus relocation decision prompted us to work together. Despite our different backgrounds and positions we all felt that people and places move us as academics, but we failed to make sense of how and why. We felt that the neoliberal regime interrupted this movement, but its role appeared elusive and difficult to grasp. By doing autoethnography together we were able to better understand all this. Shared learning was sparked at the borders of discomfort and through disagreements on the making of Aalto, academic work,

and research philosophy. Acknowledging and respecting our differences eventually led to moments of joint discovery.

In keeping with the principles of collaborative autoethnography, we first crafted texts separately, each author focusing on their personal relationship with Aalto University and its predecessors, as well as their move to Hanken. We wrote texts that we felt enabled us to convey our sense of belonging and loss. As we did not set strict criteria on their content and form, the stories differed in terms of length and depth of reflection. However, they were all very personal. In the second phase, we engaged in dialogue and joint analysis of our texts. We interpreted what our stories mean and how they (fail to) relate to each other. We discussed our anxieties in being frank and sincere, and negotiated ways to make sure that we all felt comfortable with what we were sharing. In this analysis phase, we discussed our multiple identities and their fragmented and dynamic nature. Changes in Aalto—most notably new policies, faculty layoffs, and the campus decision—played out as “identity jolts” for us, prompting action (Horton et al., 2014).

We sought to find ways to make sense of key elements in our stories. Time and agency are examples of themes that we could not initially agree on. They intertwined in many ways in our stories. We noted that time and temporality varied but could not for some time agree on how and why they did so. This led us to discuss what we mean by past, present and future, how they relate to our identities, social groups, and senses of place, and what agentive power time and temporality have when we construct our identities. Next, we discussed how our identities played out in the stories, in relation to time, agency, and managerial control, and how we gave meaning to ourselves, to the social groups we were a part of, and to the places we inhabited. Our different organizational positions and “life stages” enabled us to make sense of some of the differences in our experiences. Family arrangements and situations played a pivotal role here. “Work is done in the context of life” (Hirst and Humphreys, 2020: 710) and our identities are “embedded and embodied” (Cunliffe, 2018). This means that our evolving academic identities could not be detached from our obligations and identities as mothers and fathers, for example (Lund et al., 2019).

We were asked by the reviewers of this paper to elaborate on our different positionalities. Emma is a woman in her early 30s. She became a mother while she was working on her PhD. Her second child was born when she landed the tenure track position at Hanken. On the face of it, Emma is a model achiever of neoliberal academia as she has proceeded from PhD-student to post-doctoral researcher to assistant professor at a young age. While she loves doing research, she feels that she fails to meet the high standards of academic work and combining them with motherhood. Marko is a man in his early 50s and a father of two grown-up children. As we shall see, he represents everything that the neoliberal university scorns. He has not competed for a faculty position but being a project researcher is his lifestyle. Janne, another man in his early 50s, benefits from neoliberal academia as he loves to write papers. He became a father relatively late, balances between different spheres of life, and is aware of his privileged position in the university.

Finnish society conditions our positionalities. For many of us in Finland, it is still possible to balance between different spheres of life. Emma is an example of an ambitious young woman who is a mother but still aims to pursue a career in academia. Writing in the USA, Ashcraft (2017) laments that there are significantly less women than men faculty with children. “Her personal choice, they say,” she adds with some sarcasm (p. 49). In Finland, welfare state policies such as day care provision subsidized by the State support a dual earner family model. Although Finnish academia remains gendered (and racialized) in that it is dominated by white men, we do not necessarily have to “choose” between career and family; this applies to women as well as men (Lund and Tienari, 2019; Lund et al., 2019).

We were encouraged by the reviewers to mobilize our senses and get to the heart of “(dis)placement” as a sensorial experience. Ashcraft’s (2017) ideas were helpful in pushing us further in this

regard. She urges us to move beyond a mode of criticism she dubs “a confessional tale of Neoliberal U and me” where “I critique the hamster wheel of overwork by pedaling faster” (pp. 41–42). We offer three very different tales and move toward what Ashcraft (2017) calls “inhabited criticism,” that is nourishing relational enactments between academics. For us, criticism is about sharing our different vulnerabilities and thereby “detecting subtle flickers of other possibilities” (p. 37). Our different positionalities offer a grounding for such criticism—and, most importantly, to do it together.

Finally, we discussed how to “theorize” our texts in order to move beyond our personal and joint reflections and to say something meaningful about academic work and identities. We were persuaded by the reviewers to consider how neoliberal academia conditions our stories, and how place matters therein. This offered a way for us to go beyond individual storytelling and reflection and to consider how our different experiences resonate with developments in universities more generally. It made us acutely aware of something we assumed all along but failed to communicate earlier: identities are not (only) personal. The choices we make are not necessarily from our own volition but conditioned and sometimes even determined by the neoliberal university, on the one hand, and society, on the other. Next, we offer extracts from our stories.

Us and Aalto University

Emma: Into the family

In 2005, I began my undergraduate studies in the Helsinki University of Technology. By becoming part of the Otaniemi community, I appreciated early on the diversity around me. I had entered the university thinking I was a technical person who would become a physicist, but I found myself in work psychology and leadership courses. This was alright in Otaniemi where mixing technology with social sciences was increasingly popular. The birth of Aalto University was a confusing time for all, but it did not stir my emotions. The change did not bother me too much as a student. My Aalto reality was rather narrow, and mainly embraced the HUT community in Otaniemi. It would continue like this for some time, as I began my PhD studies in 2012 at the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management in the School of Science (a part of the old HUT in Aalto). I liked its atmosphere. I belonged to a research group focusing on virtual and mobile work, “vmWork.” It was like a family to me. I had no kids and enjoyed working a lot.

Marko: Finding a group and starting to lose it

My story begins in the Helsinki University of Technology (HUT) in 1986 when I was a first-year undergraduate student. A couple of months into my studies, I realized that engineering was not for me. The following year I applied to the University of Helsinki and found my alma mater in the Unit of Social Psychology. In 1997, I was—ironically—employed as a researcher in the Work Psychology and Leadership unit in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management at HUT. This marked the beginning of my 20 years as a researcher in Otaniemi. It was my work home base—a place—even though I have always preferred to live in Helsinki.

In 2001, we set up the “vmWork” research unit at HUT. I felt that I was at the core of this group. It was our creation and I felt proud of it. My way of doing research is related to my identity as a social psychologist. “vmWork” provided me with a place to conduct research that was guided by this tradition. We carried out projects commissioned and funded by industrial companies and Finnish funding agencies. I worked on temporary contracts for a long time until HUT made it into a permanent one. This made me feel secure and a legitimate member of the academic community and emphasized my identity as a member of HUT. As the merger of three universities was in sight,

I somewhat reluctantly accepted that HUT would become part of Aalto. Despite the threats I felt I was first only moderately touched by the Aalto management model apart from the mandatory bureaucratic hierarchy. However, ghosts of the future became increasingly evident.

Janne: Politics and politicking

I am an organization and management studies scholar and I was based at Aalto University School of Business—formerly the Helsinki School of Economics—for a long time. I completed my PhD there in 1999. After 8 years of commuting to a regional university, I returned to my alma mater where the writing was on the wall. In November 2007, the Ministry of Education gave an official “go ahead” decision for the merger. I had studied corporate M&A for some 15 years, so I expected that the biggest merger counterpart—the University of Technology, nine times the size of HSE—would dominate and effectively take over the new university. It took me a while to understand that HUT was far from a monolithic entity. I realized that it was a mosaic of little dukedoms around self-conscious professors in very different disciplines, some fighting amongst themselves and not forming any grand alliances. The threat of a HUT takeover did not materialize at first.

Integration work proceeded at Aalto. Politicking and fighting for resources was fierce. This I learned in discussions with management at the School of Business as well as in the committee work I was involved in at the School and university levels. I was satisfied with my work, because I could understand the opportunities offered by the vision of Aalto, which was to construe a new and exciting university where boundaries could be crossed. I saw it as an opportunity to develop my work in a meaningful way. However, for me it was important that the changes in Aalto would take place on a common ground and among equals. Finland plunged into a recession and the School of Business was not doing as well as I would have liked in the resource allocation within Aalto.

When things start to happen

Emma: Crossing boundaries

In 2014, the first break in my relationship with Otaniemi happened. I found myself making plans to work at the School of Business. My own Department of Industrial Engineering and Management went through an identity crisis in the Aalto merger due to its somehow duplicative nature to the School of Business, or “Kauppis” as it is known. I knew little about Kauppis, except that I was curious about it and felt that I needed to make connections with scholars there to stay alive in the academic world. I was not ready to permanently move abroad or elsewhere in Finland but wanted to live in the Helsinki region. Being abroad as a visiting scholar in 2014 I was both mentally and physically disconnected from the Department, and I approached the School of Business with a funding application idea. We received the funding and kicked off the project.

I was given a space in an open office in Otaniemi. I was not able to concentrate. There was a lot of gossip about potential layoffs, which I did not want to spend my energy on. I had accepted that academia rarely provides PhD students with jobs in their own universities after they graduate. As my “vmWork” team was fading away, I had little to hold onto and decided to relocate myself from Otaniemi to Kauppis in Töölö in downtown Helsinki. I must admit that I questioned my sanity at times, as I was now feeling like an outsider. I identified strongly with Aalto and my commitment helped me justify to myself my oddness at Kauppis: I embodied the “Aalto academic,” moving around, crossing boundaries, bridging silos.

In 2018, I finished my dissertation and joined the interdisciplinary International Design Business Management (IDBM) faculty as a post-doctoral researcher. We were among the first to relocate

from Töölö to the campus in Otaniemi. Our facilities there were not in the School of Business, but within shared modules in the School of Arts building. Initially I hoped that being back in Otaniemi would be business as usual. However, it would never be that again, not in the way I had experienced Otaniemi in the past. I was missing a place and a team which I could call “home” and “family.” The office I shared with others was often empty and I felt lonely. There was a growing voice inside telling me that I was not in a place where I could live out the best version of my academic self. I love working with others and will never accept the fact that academia is an individualistic place where everyone looks after themselves. That is not who I am.

Marko: Disidentification and layoff

After some 3 or 4 years in Aalto I realized that I did not suit its prototype of a valued academic. Project research with companies was downplayed and “basic research” was emphasized. The merger that resulted in the new Aalto ideals started to eat away my pillars of identity. Still, I could hold onto our shared “vmWork” identity. When that entity began to evaporate, I turned my quest for a sense of belonging elsewhere. I collaborated with my good friend in the Unit of Social Psychology at the University of Helsinki—my alma mater. The unit had always been my personal standard of excellence and studying mergers there for a year was an interesting time. I felt at home again. Meanwhile, it became apparent that a post-doctoral researcher with a permanent contract was a burden for Aalto. When I returned, the message was clear: I was not needed.

In 2016, Aalto reduced its number of staff. Post-doctoral project researchers with permanent contracts were laid off. There were many like me. The “vmWork” research group at HUT was dissolved. Most of my colleagues were laid off during spring 2016. I had a grace period until May 2017 due to a European Union funded project I worked in. I hated my job. The empty corridors made the end of “vmWork” and Work Psychology and Leadership very concrete. I voiced my disappointment but had no power or means to resist. I was stressed and defined myself by *not* belonging to Aalto. I disidentified with the new university. After being made redundant, I got a temporary job in another university, but I found that depressing, too. I was a lonely remote worker and not part of any group or place. In terms of the new neoliberal academic system I felt like a failure. Job security was taken away from me forever.

Janne: Pride, prejudice, and being pissed off

In 2014, dark clouds were on the horizon. I predicted early on that Aalto would concentrate all its operations in the main campus in what used to be the University of Technology. My business school would be moved ten kilometers away from downtown Helsinki to Otaniemi, in another city, Espoo. This changed everything for me. Helsinki is my home. I was born down the street, and I live four hundred meters from the old main building of the HSE. I am a Töölö boy and I love the neighborhood. I enjoy the walk to work. At the time, my daughter went to kindergarten nearby. I could pick her up in the afternoon and go to the park with her.

When the need to relocate became apparent to all, there was strong resistance from the business school faculty. My colleagues organized a petition to the Aalto President, but the move eventually happened in February 2019. The strategic logic in concentrating all operations in a single campus was overwhelming. But the way it was handled. . . The move was forced, and people like me had no say in the decision. This is what pissed me off. Pretending that they listen, but not listening. To become a tenant in someone else’s backyard? No thanks.

It was only with the merger that I became conscious of my business school—Kauppis—academic identity. What I knew from research I now experienced myself. The yellow brick

functionalist main building of the HSE in Töölö came to signify a glorious history that was going to be lost forever. The small campus integrated in city life was something that most of us wanted to cherish. I had mocked Otaniemi (as a physical space, not the people) for so long that it became an issue of pride for me not to move there. I was prejudiced, too. I just could not do it. I was pissed off, and I decided to apply for a professor position at Hanken, next door to the old HSE main building in downtown Helsinki. For me it is always people, people coming together, that make a place. People and laptops, so I like to work in a café or any such space where there are tables and chairs. There are plenty of spaces to choose from in Töölö. I wanted to stay there. And I did.

Out of Aalto

Emma: Disillusioned

Toward the end of my stay at Aalto, physical space had a bigger impact on me than I would like to admit, researching virtual work as I do. I was disappointed with the fact that my own office space in Otaniemi was not in the School of Business that moved there in February 2019. I often took the “long walk” over to the faculty kitchen at the School of Business side of the building just to run into people and to feel that there was a community to belong to. However, it did not feel right. I could not find peace of mind and my short-term contracts began to bug me. As my second child was born in 2019, and I went on leave, I felt distanced from Aalto and began to look for work opportunities elsewhere.

It took me a while before I was ready to write the following. Not far after I began my maternity leave, I landed an assistant professor position on the tenure track at Hanken. In a sense, my dream came true. Yet, it did not feel that way. I thought about my previous workplace a lot. I reflected upon what I had lost and gained. I tried to build a logical understanding about my new position. However, there was nothing logical about my feelings. Why did I do this to myself? I felt like I was abandoning “my people” in Aalto. Every time I went back for a meeting in Otaniemi, I felt lost. I was not embodying the place anymore. I was somehow outside the space while being in it. I realized that I was trying so hard to detach myself from Aalto and to attach myself to Hanken, that I was in a limbo. Having been a year in the new facilities in Otaniemi, I had begun to consider it home (again). My own workspace was not perfect as it was away from rest of the management studies people, but it was still at the heart of my precious Aalto.

Now I must build a new home at Hanken. I feel disillusioned. I do not have a close team that I can call family (yet). I feel restless, always thirsty for more collaboration and new research projects. Yet, I know that as long as my kids are small, there will never be enough hours in the day to fully perform according to the current standards of academic excellence. I am doing a lot of identity work to bend the limits of being the perfect mother and the perfect academic. Yet, I don't feel that the system dictates what I do. I like chasing unrealistic goals.

Marko: Dealing with atrocities of neoliberal academia

Looking back, I never did the right things to make a career in the Brave New Academia. As a project researcher I did my PhD late and published too seldom in journals that matter in performance assessments. This was fine at HUT, which valued close connections with industry and companies, but it became a problem when viewed in the light of Aalto's neoliberal excellence discourse and the tenure track career system. I feared for my future and realized that I was too old and badly equipped to compete with new academic rules and standards. I became part of the precariat. This said, I love research and I intend to continue my lifestyle. I simply have to accept that I am an academic entrepreneur with low status and uncertain future prospects.

I was first employed by Hanken about 2.5 years after getting the sack from Aalto. Due to the lapse of time, my disidentification with Aalto is burning off. Still, I wonder whether I can study Aalto objectively due to my history. I am worried that my terrible last years there make me biased. These are severe suspicions for a critical realist researcher. I found a new home in our three-person research team at Hanken. I am empowered by the fact that after many years I have a team I can identify with and feel joyful to work with. I secured project researcher funding for 2 years. Yet there seems to be less and less space in neoliberal universities—socially and physically—for people like me. I am restless and stressed.

Janne: Plan B

I was devastated with the Aalto campus decision, but I had my plan B and executed it. I was frustrated with how things turned out, but I managed to convince myself that it was my own choice to leave and to pursue opportunities elsewhere. My anger and bitterness turned into a positive force personally as I could rationalize that I needed a change anyway. My professor position allowed me this luxury and I could reinvent myself as an academic.

I had applied for the position at Hanken before the campus decision was “officially” made at Aalto. I got the job and turned from an Aalto insider into a Hanken outsider. I am not part of its inner circles as I was at Aalto University School of Business. I discovered that this suits me well. I like to feel free and work under the radar. So, in the end, I have no problems with Aalto, because I think it was my choice to leave. Ending up as an outsider at Aalto would have been a different matter, I guess, because of my pride and prejudice. I remain a business school scholar. After all the talking I did at Aalto against moving to Otaniemi, I just could not do it. I felt disappointed and somehow helpless. But I love living and working in Töölö. My daughter just started school here and I can contribute at home, too. My own life is in balance, but I can see that others are suffering. I am restless but in some strange way it suits me fine.

Discussion

While identities in neoliberal universities have received increasing research attention, sense of place has passed unnoticed in the critical discussion. In this paper, we have engaged with collaborative autoethnography and contribute to the literature in two ways. First, we have shown that while academic identities today are put into motion by the neoliberal regime, they are constructed through mundane constellations of places and social entities. We use places as vehicles for restoring coherence between our sense of self and the neoliberal “ideal” academic, and this intersects with different temporal orientations by which our identities evolve or stagnate. Second, we have elucidated how academic identities in the neoliberal university are characterized by restlessness and how academics use place and time to find meaning for themselves and their work. Our examples of identity construction in conditions of neoliberalism include progressing (Emma), staying afloat (Marko), and retaining purpose (Janne). Beyond these differences, we have illuminated how places, social entities, and time orientations influence our identity construction.

We argue that place is crucial for making sense of how academic identities are constructed today. Focusing on place is important because academic spaces are redesigned and managing physical space is a key part of the neoliberal university agenda (Baldry and Barnes, 2012). Academic work is transformed as it is dispersed across space and time, as spatial and temporal boundaries between work and non-work are redrawn, and as new university buildings are erected to symbolize their grandeur and to facilitate new forms of identity (Hancock and Spicer, 2010). Spaces ensconce power and production of relationships, but “the translation of these into an

identity ordering place is not a linear process” (Berti et al., 2018: 168). We have shown how academics inscribe different meanings to spaces, (not) turning them into meaningful locations that are places (Cresswell, 2004). We do not always conform or adapt to spatialized norms and employee ideals (Taylor and Spicer, 2007).

Specifically, we argue that places, social entities, and temporalities intertwine as sources of identity. For understanding academic identities it is useful to focus on how layers of place (spaces such as city neighborhoods, buildings and workspaces that are made meaningful by people) intertwine with social aspects of identity (such as academia, university, department, research group, and research collaborations) and different temporal orientations (past, present, and future). Our study shows that different aspects of identity may become salient in academic work, depending on the professional background, organizational position, social relations, and life stage of academics. This leads us to agree with Grey and O’Toole (2020), Hirst and Humphreys (2020) and others in that place is a social construct that can acquire a range of meanings that relate to identities over time. The meaning of place “is never fixed but only accomplished in and for the social engagement at hand” (Auburn and Barnes, 2006: 44). Place is a discursive resource on which we draw in constructing our identities (Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Larson and Pearson, 2012).

Neoliberalism challenges our sense of place and contributes to dislocation as it glorifies mobility and movement that is increasingly intense among academics. We have shown how the neoliberal university socializes us into (perhaps unwittingly) contributing to the dismantling of academic communities that are tied to physical spaces. Nevertheless, neoliberalism makes us long for places that we find meaningful. Our identities as academics become restless. We may long for places but many of us detach ourselves from the past and present in order to be able to remain “competitive” as future-oriented academics with high potential (Lund and Tienari, 2019). Although the three authors’ experiences are all conditioned by neoliberal discourse and practice, we construe our social and place identities in different ways and with different temporal orientations, and our academic identities are constructed differently.

Emma, a junior female academic, puts emphasis on the way space and people come together to form a meaningful collaborative place. Her identity construction through places, social groups, and time is about progressing. As such, it is fragile. She appears as the “ideal” neoliberal academic as she constantly drives into the future, but she has now reached a point in her life where caring for small children prevents her from fully living out her academic identity. Her “mandate to outsmart time haunts the impossible collision of temporalities” (Ashcraft, 2017: 39). Juggling family and work, Emma feels that she makes tradeoffs with “performance” in different spheres of life. A sense of place is important for her academic identity as she attempts to move away from spaces that are not aligned with her values of teamwork. She puts emphasis on the way place and people come together to either enforce or create a disjoint with her (at the time current) identity, making her either stay or progress to another place.

In sharp contrast, Marko’s identity construction in the neoliberal university is about staying afloat. Marko, a senior male academic, argues that in his life place is less relevant for self-definitions than social group memberships gained and lost. Still, it matters. Neoliberal standards of excellence forced him out of his “home base” at Aalto; he lost his place in the university and this tarnished his academic identity. Yet he continues to enact it with perceived membership to a social group and an orientation to the past, remaining a social psychologist for life. Marko cannot escape places and has reached the point where his social identity (belonging to the team with Emma and Janne) is so intertwined with place that it seems almost trivial—especially as it is now largely virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Marko continues to strive for positive academic identity because it is a key part of his lifestyle. He does not fit the neoliberal image of the “ideal” academic and he must find new reference points for his identity construction (Haslam, 2004). He is forced to

accept the fact that he belongs to the precariat and he must come to terms with those places where he is able to live out his identity. His restlessness is tied to his insecurity as an academic.

Janne's identity construction is about retaining purpose. Janne, another senior male academic, discovered an (at least partial) illumination in his academic identity from the concept of place identity (Grey and O'Toole, 2020; Proshansky et al., 1983). A specific place became crucial for him, and his various connections and collaborations with people turned out to be "placeless." He shares Emma's future orientation, but he fluctuates between present and future in a place where he can meaningfully live out his academic identity. Janne's professional pride was threatened by the way the Aalto campus decision was handled by university management. He wanted to remain in the place he loves and decided to leave Aalto in order to do so. A threat to his sense of place triggered a reconsideration of his academic identity. Janne managed to escape, retain a sense of purpose, and "take freedom back" (Jones et al., 2020). However, this is merely personal freedom to choose one's place. Janne feels in control of his restlessness and it results in bad conscience of remaining a "bystander" when others are treated badly in the neoliberal university (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020).

Places, positionalities, and positions in social groups as well as temporal orientations help us construct our academic identities. However, beyond our different experiences we are all restless. This is perhaps the most severe consequence of neoliberal discourse and practice in academia: it keeps us constantly on our toes. Emma and Janne are for the moment relatively comfortable in their restlessness, which is a part of how they see themselves as academics. Their temporal orientation is in the future (as well as the present) and this offers them opportunities to make spaces into meaningful places. Marko, in contrast, became restless only after the "hamster wheel" of neoliberal academia (Ashcraft, 2017) spat him out. Restlessness for him is accompanied by uncertain prospects and it is a constant source of stress. He turns into the past to find meaning and to retain his academic identity.

Ideas for future research

Our collaborative autoethnography suggests that there are places that escape control by university managers. Courpasson et al. (2017) talk about collective "resisting places," and highlight the meaningfulness of places where resistance is nurtured and enacted. This leads us to suggest that identity, place, and resistance to the neoliberal university offer an important avenue for future research. As Ashcraft (2017) suggests, resistance in academia tends to be "ordinary"; isolated and ephemeral. Our study indicates that this ephemeral resistance happens in, and in relation to, places and temporalities. "Non-territorial space practices" (Vischer, 2005) where privacy is eradicated and where established ways of arranging academic work are challenged impact upon the perceived degree of control that academics have over their working environment and work, and this is likely to impact on how their identities evolve in the neoliberal university (Baldry and Barnes, 2012).

However, implications of neoliberalism extend far beyond spatial arrangements. Viewing places and resistance in the light of different temporal orientations enables us to see how place and its people come together to offer either a point of departure, a reference point to hold onto, or a future for our academic identities. Marko's story shows how challenges of social (and place-based) identity—and, in his case, strong disidentification with the new Aalto University—do not necessarily translate into overt resistance. As Contu (2008) posits, we are left with the question: "what counts as resistance?" For Contu, there is no resistance without risk and costs and assuming full responsibility for actions and their consequences. Yet the question may not be so clear. McCabe (2019) argues that the distinction between what counts as resistance and what does not can be blurry. Resistance can be ambiguous and fluid; simultaneously productive and oppositional (Bristow et al., 2017).

Resistance to how we are treated in neoliberal universities may also be societally bound. To an extent, resistance is in the eye of the beholder (Lund and Tienari, 2019; Prasad and Prasad, 2000). Janne's voluntary exit from Aalto University may appear to some in Finland as resistance. In Finnish universities where it is highly exceptional for tenured professors to move from a higher status university (Aalto) to a lower one (Hanken), some may view his choice as an explicit statement to resist what the new university stands for. He exited the organization after his attempts at voicing concern and discontent proved to be futile (Hirschman, 1971). However, the same act would probably not be considered as resistance in the UK where the higher education "market" is large and faculty mobility between universities is active. As such, the societally bound nature of (what counts as) resistance in academia offers an important avenue for future research. Neoliberalism is adopted and adapted in different ways in different societies (Ashcraft, 2017) and this may determine (what counts as) resistance locally in academic work. We encourage comparative studies of academics and resistance in neoliberal universities in different societal and socio-cultural contexts.

Different views notwithstanding, there is something to resist in the neoliberal university. Zawadzki and Jensen (2020) argue that neoliberalism prevents early career academics from contesting bullying. Ratle et al. (2020) add that "terror," or the inculcation of fear through processes of domination, characterize their experiences. Marko's story shows us that it is not only "young" academics who suffer in neoliberal academia. When you are sucked into back-to-back temporary contracts and project work, and when the university adopts a neoliberal agenda, you become a *persona non grata*. Fear for job security becomes a chronic condition; life becomes a struggle where identity is muddled, and resistance is muted. To different degrees, then, we become victims of institutional and interpersonal, overt and symbolic violence in the name of (not) achieving the right targets and standards of "excellence" in the neoliberal university (Ashcraft, 2017; Butler and Spoelstra, 2014, 2020). Academics' different experiences and reactions in these conditions must be studied further.

Implications for learning

The "increasingly neoliberal you" takes its toll for all of us (Ashcraft, 2017: 37). We are restless; constantly on our toes, straddling confidence and confusion, if not compliance and resistance (cf. Bristow et al., 2017). We look for places where we can feel that we live out our temporal orientation as well as our connections with people and our academic work. Places become "time machines" that make us revisit the past, interpret the present, or live out the future when we collaborate with other people and cope with neoliberal standards of academic "excellence."

Our relational enactments as we affect each other in and through our collaborative autoethnography have helped us locate and make sense of our restlessness in the neoliberal university. It has helped us reflect on different ways in which we can deal with it. Solidarity and empathy for varied experiences and a determination to see the world from different positions and perspectives is crucial here. This joint research initiative has alerted us to the transpersonal flow of feeling and embodiment that is crucial for coming to terms with our different experiences (Ashcraft, 2017). Pressures to produce results that count in assessment exercises in neoliberal universities across the Global North and beyond can lead to confusion and disillusionment. Through our collaborative autoethnography we have learned to discuss and reflect on our academic identities in these conditions.

By engaging in dialogue among colleagues (who are in different positions and life stages and whose identities may be construed differently), we have learned to appreciate the varied ways we deal with the pressures put on us. We recommend similar research initiatives for our colleagues across the world. For us as individuals, unpacking the complexities of our identities has been a therapeutic exercise. It has helped us to learn about ourselves and others and to support each other

in dealing with the atrocities of neoliberalism. For us as a collective, collaborative autoethnography has shown how important it is to work through disagreements and conflicts, to respect differences, and to see beyond them. Solidarity is a mundane accomplishment where we learn to do this together.

Our study informs management learning by emphasizing the relevance of bringing (back) more critical reflection (Reynolds, 1998) and contextual sensitivity (Vu et al., 2018) into academic work. Learning is embedded, and as we have shown, it cannot escape place and time. Orchestrating “interdisciplinarity” from the top down and forcing boundary-crossing cooperation on academics is in our experience highly suspect. Rather, we must cross boundaries of our own accord. When university management are unable to support us in enacting meaningful academic identities, we must support each other. We must share our experiences, build on collaboration and dialogue, and try to make the university a meaningful place again.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Associate Editor Jamie McDonald and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism, encouragement, and support. The paper developed immensely based on their observations and help. Thank you also to Professor Susan Meriläinen for her insightful comments. For the sake of authenticity in collaborative autoethnography, this paper has not been language-checked by a native English speaker.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from The Finnish Work Environment Fund (Työsuojelurahasto), project no. 190370.

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