

Resisting sexism, aggression, and burnout in academic leadership: Surviving in the gendered managerial academy

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Abstract

How is it possible to survive as a woman senior leader in the gendered managerial academy? In this autoethnographical article, I illustrate the lived reality, insecurity, and struggle of academic leadership. Drawing from three vignettes, I discuss decision-making processes, blatant sexist aggressions, and the problematic negation of affect and personal life. Their critical contribution is to expose the consequences of gendered managerialism in the neo-liberal academy and the false promise of 'leadership', in which women continue to experience gender challenges, sexism, and the risk of burnout in their everyday experiences. However, I also show how it is possible to counter the detrimental effects of gendered managerialism through four forms of resistance: resistance through embodied affective authenticity; resistance through solidarities, and social relations with others; resistance through feminist activism; and resistance by stepping back.

KEYWORDS

academia, affect, autoethnography, body, emotion, feminism, gender, leadership, managerialism

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1 | INTRODUCTION

I hung a picture on the wall today.

It is a collage of images illustrating a city, its vistas, its industry, its famous landmarks and the sense of place and life within. The picture was chosen with care and love, given to me by colleagues and friends when I left an academic institution in that city after a senior role in academic leadership.

Only, the picture has been lying around, gathering dust for over a year and today is the first time I felt able to look at it properly, to hang it, to have it around me. It moves me, causes me to reflect that only now do I feel able to write about the experience.

As the short opening vignette demonstrates, this article is an autoethnographical account of experiences of senior academic leadership in a university, although I am no longer in that role. My aim is to explore the lived realities, insecurities, messiness, and struggles of academic leadership and to voice the challenge of trying to lead in academia with a feminist ethic. I address experiences of sexism, performativity, and potential burnout, underpinned with gendered identity as a woman academic. I situate these experiences within the context of 'leadership' in the neo-liberal, managerial academy, with its emphasis on performance and marketization in a high-pressure environment. The emotional, intellectual, and physical labor required in negotiating such leadership provoked a high risk of resultant burnout and negated the promise of the role. Despite this, I illustrate how sexism, aggression, and burnout in academic leadership can be resisted.

Universities are widely accepted as gendered organizations (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Fagan & Teasdale, 2021), which individuals experience through gendered advantage and disadvantage (Pullen et al., 2017), amid gendered conceptualizations of academic work (Angervall & Beach, 2020). Organized around a masculine 'ideal' academic with no caring responsibilities (Martinovic & Verkuyten, 2013; Mauthner & Edwards, 2010), careers in universities remain problematic for women or those classed as 'Other' to the idealized norms (Bleijenbergh et al., 2012). There is a strong body of research in *Gender, Work & Organization* outlining the experiences of women in the early to mid-stages of academic career as they navigate the demands, for example, of precarity in contractual status (Abdellatif, 2021; Ivancheva et al., 2019); the struggles and pressures of returning to work after maternity leave (Davies et al., 2022; Huppertz et al., 2019); or balancing academic work with motherhood and family life (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; Thun, 2020; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). However, less is known about experiences of senior academic leadership at executive levels of the university, where the road to academic leadership is difficult and unequal. In the UK, women in the top tier of university management structures remained at 31% in 2018, the same as 2016 (Womenscount, 2018). Being a professor is usually a prerequisite to becoming a Vice-Chancellor (VC), a Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) or a Dean, but in the UK women are only 29% of all professors in the latest figures (Hesa, 2022). Women academics remain a minority at senior levels, a situation which is replicated on a global scale (American Council on Education (ACE) & Center for International Higher Education (CIHE), 2021).

At the time of my experiences of senior academic leadership, which ended just before the pandemic began, I led a large academic unit comprising several Schools of multiple disciplines. I was responsible for strategic planning, budgets, management of staff, performance, and outcomes, during a period of significant transformation. I was also a member of the university's Executive Board, which met weekly and formulated and implemented the strategy of the university. I acknowledge that undertaking such a role indicates a degree of privilege reflecting my position as an educated, white, Western academic. Yet, as I will illustrate, marginalization can still be felt through isolation, sexist aggressions, a lack of allyship, and the all-consuming nature of this type of academic work which negates embodied affect, care of the self and others, and interaction with personal life.

In exploring these challenges of academic leadership, my contribution is to expose the consequences of gendered managerialism in the neo-liberal academy and the false promise of 'leadership', in which women continue to experience gender challenges, sexism, and the risk of burnout in their everyday experiences. However, I also illustrate how it is possible to counter the detrimental effects of gendered managerialism through four forms of

resistance: resistance through embodied affective authenticity; resistance through solidarities and social relations with others; resistance through feminist activism and resistance by stepping back. In doing so, I weave together the personal, political, and theoretical to explore alternative ways of knowing the academy (Beavan et al., 2021) using autoethnography and writing from the heart to evoke academic and daily life (Pelias, 2004).

2 | LEADERSHIP IN THE NEO-LIBERAL, MANAGERIAL ACADEMY

The modern university has embraced a neoliberal mentality that detracts from its educational mission, contribution to knowledge, and societal benefit (Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2022). Universities have widely adopted a managerialist and marketized agenda that incorporates management controls and metrics in an increasing competitive environment for students and rankings (Gebreiter, 2022; Knights, 2021; Musselin, 2018). Institutions have become increasingly corporatized and commodified, run by executive boards and led by a chief executive or VC, reminiscent of the private sector, diminishing the role of senates, staff members or trade unions in the process. At the more senior levels of Deans, PVCs, and VCs, leadership is defined around managing a particular academic unit, a portfolio such as education or research, or acting as a chief executive in the case of the VC. Ultimately, the VC has the final authority within the institution, but others are expected to contribute to a vision, strategy, income, and performance.

It is questionable whether senior academic leadership can be defined as 'leadership' or whether it is rather a 'management' role in a hierarchical organization, which reinforces the performative power structures of a modern university. University leaders are forever seen as 'management', 'other', 'them' as opposed to the 'us' of academics and professional services staff. We are the management whom other staff rail against when student recruitment is down, budgets are cut, promotions are not awarded, and universities fall in reputation. Much of this critique against management is justified as universities have failed to address the critical challenges of modern society (Connell, 2019; Parker, 2023). Nonetheless, as seems common in the current context, my university defined us in leadership terms; we were a 'university leadership team', denoting an attempt to work collectively, suggesting that together we would lead the university to somewhere or something better. As a result, I will continue to refer to 'academic leadership' in this article, even though much of the role was managerial, and only the very senior leadership held the power and authority to carry out the actions needed to achieve the proposed outcomes.

Yet many of us in the managerial echelons of the university, are ordinary academics who over the years rose through the career hierarchy to positions where, sometimes, the next step could be senior leadership. My choice to seek a senior leadership role by applying for a specific job was not a long-held ambition but something that crept up as a possibility over time. One of my motivations was an awareness of the lack of women in higher levels in academia. I had been part of an organized network of women deans and deputy deans that had grown very slowly over time, but our numbers were still very limited. Moreover, as a feminist with research interests in women's careers in contexts outside academia, I felt that I should act to address the lack of women in higher levels within my own sector by engaging in a leadership role. While avoiding gendered essentialism that reduces leadership to masculine authoritarian stereotypes (Mulcahy & Linehan, 2014), I hoped to lead with a feminist ethic that engaged others, supported collaboration, and valued inclusion. A feminist approach can organize for intersectional equality, develop emancipation, and enact a feminist ethic of care for the human and natural world (Benschop, 2021), incorporating a lived activism (Ahmed, 2017), and a political intent to make a difference (Contu, 2020). A feminist ethic supports empathetic solidarities to support change (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019).

3 | APPROACHING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In exploring the challenges of academic leadership, I take an autoethnographical approach. Autoethnography is the analysis of the self in a social context, where the term can relate to both the process of research, as a methodological approach, and the resultant related product in the form of a piece of writing or representation (Ellis

et al., 2011). This article is a representation of both an approach and a product. In other words, the whole article is autoethnographical, drawing from interpretation of the self, grounded in social and cultural contexts; and it also reflects autoethnography in the form of writing, comprising an analytical narrative surrounding specific autoethnographic vignettes.

Autoethnographies can take a number of forms. Evocative forms tend to focus on emotion and evocation to examine personal experience, which allows for the expression of vulnerability, therapeutic disclosure, and transformation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Haynes, 2017; Holman-Jones et al., 2013). Analytical autoethnography, promulgated by Anderson (2006), has a more explicit commitment to theoretical analysis and insight into a broader set of social phenomena than the researcher themselves. Evocative and analytical forms of autoethnography can readily be blended to retain the evocative power of the personal account with theoretically informed analysis (Fernando et al., 2020). Critical autoethnographies acknowledge intersecting privileged and marginalized identities within potentially oppressive cultural contexts (Adams et al., 2015; Calafell, 2013; Zou, 2021).

My autoethnographical approach blends the evocative and the analytical in a reflexive interpretation of previous events and experiences, but is also concerned with ethical responsibility to expose unfairness or injustice, as in critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). I present three autoethnographical vignettes that illustrate different aspects of my leadership experience; a moment, a dilemma, or a challenge that occurred. The use of vignettes is common in autoethnographical writing, whereby they are a retrospective construct of particular moments rather than a contemporaneous account (Haynes, 2017; Porschitz & Siler, 2017), although they may sometimes be informed by notes or diaries (Humphreys, 2005). I did not keep a formal diary during my period in leadership, but I kept copious notes and jotted down thoughts both during and after the role. However, these vignettes were written after I had left the leadership role, based on memories and reflections, to give an insight into the performance and experience of the role and to expose the vulnerability, emotion, and embodied nature of academic leadership for the purposes of this article.

The issues raised in each of the vignettes surface the challenges of leadership in academia, including sexism, and risk of burnout, which remain personally challenging and emotional. Yet, by analyzing them critically and reflexively in the context of the gendered managerial academy they allow my situated knowledge (and previous abjection) to become powerful, both as rich data and as a feminist way of knowing. This reflexive approach allows for a repositioning and transformation of academic identity that can support feminist academic praxis (Haynes, 2023). Therefore, although I acknowledge my privilege as a white, Western woman in a senior position in academia, I show that as a woman in leadership, I am still in the minority, exposed to unrealistic expectations, sexism, and assaults on mental and physical health. Exposing and voicing the challenge of trying to lead in academia with a feminist ethic is a liberating action but it also has a critical intent in exposing and driving resistance to cultural inequalities which may lead to more emancipatory actions and solidarities within the academy. Autoethnography, such as this, can therefore be a means of sharing vulnerability, supporting feminist solidarity and generating action (Reedy & Haynes, 2023; Suzanne & Reiss, 2023).

I acknowledge, however, that autoethnography raises ethical issues in its involvement of the self and others in the writing. Most notably, the vignettes include some personal information concerning family members which are central to the experiences under discussion. Without disclosing these issues and close connections, their interaction with my working life would not be visible, the visceral nature of their effects would not be forthcoming, and writing openly and differently would be less effective. As human beings, our lives are explicitly intertwined between personal and professional spaces and identities; limiting discussion to one area would limit the self. Nonetheless, full consent from family members has been given to disclose these stories. I have also considered care for the self to the extent of disclosure. Difficult experiences fade over time, promote self-learning and reflection. Self-subjection can become voyeuristic in autoethnography but it can be overcome by theorizing and politicization and by placing vulnerability in a healing space (van de Berg, 2022). Lastly, I have deliberately not been overly explicit about my role, peers and colleagues, or the specific university involved, to avoid too close a focus. The institution is in many

senses irrelevant, and the intent is not to be critical of individuals or institutions, but to highlight the challenges of leadership in the managerial academy.

4 | THREE AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL VIGNETTES

I will now present the vignettes, where each is positioned with some contextual information and subsequently analyzed in relation to wider issues in the academy.

4.1 | Difficult decisions and ambivalent identity

After 6 months in my new job, I was clear in understanding some of the challenges facing the sector and the institution. Faced with demographic changes in the numbers of students and intense competition in the sector, many universities are restructuring, trying to cut costs and enhance income streams, in a period of higher student fees and greater managerialism (see, for example, Jabbar et al., 2018). Alongside a pressure to enhance performance, in the form of league tables, student surveys and research outputs, came the imperative to operate on a smaller budget. The effect was a maelstrom of competing pressures to do more with less, which was all consuming and resulted in having to take difficult decisions.

My husband and I are taking a much-needed break before the start of the academic year in early September. The workload has been relentless over the summer and in fact since I took the post. I have hardly had a minute to breathe and think, plan or act. The pace of the work is intense, with continual change. The whole institution is in flux and even my own role has expanded and changed after only 6 months. It is far bigger than the role I was appointed to, with much more responsibility. I feel as if the ground is moving under my feet. I am totally exhausted and in need of a rest.

We are driving up to Scotland for a week, allowing time for an opportunity to recharge with some walks and fresh air in nature. It is 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon. As my husband drives, I take what I hope is a last look at my emails on my work phone before intending to put it away for a while during this annual leave. The volume and intensity of email traffic is a relentless crush that sits on my chest like a weight.

But there it is: an instruction for the leadership team. There is a meeting a week on Monday morning. Come with your proposals and plans to save £X million¹ within each of your academic units and central services.

My heart sinks. I wish I could unopen the email once more so that I can relax. I really need to clear my head and enjoy some space from the relentless grind of the work but there is no forgetting of the demands. While my husband goes on a photography course, taking pictures of moving water, rivers, and mountains, I stay in the holiday cottage wracking my brains on how to save such a large sum of money, when we have already cut back on research budgets, administrative support and office essentials. I crunch numbers and try out various scenarios. The only way to save this money is cutting jobs and that means losing people, notably academic staff. My heart sinks.

This was one of the early challenges I faced in this role, indicative of the pace of the role and the nature of the decision making. I had hoped to behave in a consultative and collaborative way in this leadership role, working with my own team in the academic unit and with the wider leadership team, but the pace of change was relentless. Already my own role and responsibility had been expanded and considerably widened due to restructuring only 6 months after I started the original role. Perhaps, I could have behaved differently in several ways such as refusing

this wider, expanded role but that would have meant I was without a portfolio, losing face and potentially losing my job, feeling like a failure. I could have broken the strict edict of confidentiality and delegated the task of planning these cuts to other colleagues, while I was on annual leave, but that would have abdicated responsibility and placed the burden on others. In any case, the restructuring and transitioning meant that the leadership team of my academic unit was barely in place, and I did not yet have trusted colleagues I could involve. I could have ignored the instruction entirely, taking my annual leave as planned and failing to outline the details of any savings at the meeting. This would have risked placing my academic unit into a more vulnerable position, having cuts imposed outside our control and jeopardizing our operations. I had my laptop with me and access to relevant data, indicative in itself of the likelihood of having to work during the holiday. In the event, during this annual leave, I planned how we could potentially cut the budget by identifying the programs with the fewest students and least opportunity to expand in relation to their staff costs. By the end of the week, I had some idea of which disciplines would have to save money by cutting academic posts. Yet the spreadsheets and crunching of data obfuscated, and was abstracted from, the reality that cutting staff numbers would have profound effects on people's lives.

While not necessarily a gendered challenge, as any male leaders in an equivalent role faced the same kind of dilemma, I position this event as indicative of my ambivalent gendered identity within the instrumental rationality of academic organizing in a managerialist culture. Although in a senior position in my role, the instruction comes from above, from a more senior leader, where there is a clear power differential providing a disembodied yet powerful patriarchal command in the form of the email. There is apparently no room for negotiation or delay, proper consultation and reflection. At this time, less than a year into the job, I was ambivalent about the apparent vagaries of the role. I was a 'nice girl', socialized into acquiescence, wanting to please, trying to make a go of 'leadership' (see Katila & Meriläinen, 2002), while knowing that I was essentially upholding the dominance of managerialism that I had hoped not to reproduce, even if trying to do this with a sense of ethical responsibility to those colleagues potentially affected. Leadership exerts a personal cost on leaders due to its cognitive complexity and responsibility in challenging times and its potentially unrealistic and difficult goals, exacerbated by isolation and loneliness (Barling & Cloutier, 2017). There is no wonder that the challenge of cutting budgets caused me a significant degree of stress and soul searching during this period. More significantly, it effectively meant a period of great uncertainty and potential stress for everyone in the institution, resulting in some colleagues having to leave and losing their incomes.

The second vignette, which follows, illustrates some indicative and sexist behaviors experienced in this leadership role.

4.2 | Aggression at the Advisory Board

The use of lay advisors in academia is common throughout many institutional settings. Sometimes they are part of the formal constitution of the university, representing a set of trustees or governors who are the ultimate authority of the institution, holding the senior leadership to account. Often, they have an advisory role, offering an external perspective on matters such as developments, resourcing, curricula, or research, with members drawn from civil society, the public sector, professions, business, or alumni. In this section, I outline the experience of chairing an Advisory Board meeting for my academic unit. Although it is more usual for one of the lay members to chair the board, in this case we had no lay chair and one of the intended outcomes of the meeting was to firm up the membership and leadership of the board. The membership mostly comprised the existing board, which I inherited from the previous regime where the incumbents were all previously male, although the structure and remit of the academic unit and my role had significantly changed since their appointment. There was one new member attending for the first time. Although there were two female members of the Advisory Board, neither of them could attend and therefore on this occasion all the board attendees were male. The only other attendee was a male member of staff from my academic unit. I was the only woman in the room.

My colleague and I had hoped for a productive discussion with the board members on the plans for the academic unit. We had prepared and sent some brief documents in advance and set the agenda for discussion around three questions on insights, strategy and support. In doing so, we hoped to focus the discussion on how the board could support the unit.

I open the meeting with the usual greetings, thanks, and introductions. I outline the agenda for the Advisory Board, what we hope to achieve and how we value the board's input.

It is not long at all before the board descends into chaos.

One of the members starts raising his voice and hectoring me. He outlines what he sees to be all the problems of the academic unit and all the things I apparently should be doing about it.

Why haven't we got a building like X university?

Why don't we have more students?

Why don't YOU do this?

Why didn't YOU do that?

Why aren't YOU....?

Whatever he sees as the problem, it is apparently my fault, even though many of the issues he is referring to are completely outside my control.

He is standing now, waving his arms, pacing around, looming large, standing tall almost over me.

I try to respond, explain what we can actually do, what we cannot, what we have already done and are planning to do.

He shouts louder over my voice. He will not stop asserting, yelling, waving his arms....

I try again to respond, pull the discussion back to the relevant points. He looms larger and louder.

All bar one, they all join in. Barracking, yelling, hectoring...

'And another thing'...

I feel like I am being attacked.

I am angry, my throat clenches, I find it hard to speak now. I feel my body tensing and my eyes pricking. I don't want to yell back because I expect that I will cry, not out of upset, but out of fury, wild emotions are surging within me.

How dare they?

If I cry, I will appear weak.

If I walk out, I will also appear weak.

I wonder if they are trying to provoke me to do either of these things.

I will not show weakness.

I set my face to stone, try to breathe and calm myself.

The agenda is trashed. The hoped-for debate is hijacked. The dominance of their testosterone filled logic grows in the room. It is almost palpable. I am the scapegoat on the whipping post.

My colleague has his head down.

After what seems an age, I manage to speak up and respond. Given the time, I suggest we move to a working lunch and indicate the sandwiches. The new member of the board, who has been silent throughout, leaves the room and does not come back. I stand and leave the room, take some moments to recoup, and then agree with my colleague that we will end the meeting at this point. I cannot continue to talk to these people. I re-enter, thank them for coming and state we will end the meeting there.

This was one of the most difficult group meetings I have encountered in my academic career, an experience which felt like an attack, personally on me as an individual and also as a woman in that position of leadership. I regard it as a highly sexist encounter triggered not by the issues themselves but by the fact that I have a gendered

woman's body. Sexism in academia is pervasive (Yarrow & Davies, 2022). Women leaders may ostensibly hold power through their formal positions in organizations, yet remain marginalized in social relations because their feminine bodies are out of place, triggering simultaneous disgust and attraction (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a). The aggression expressed the shouting, pacing, waving arms, and looming near by a man who shouts louder and stands larger, is a power struggle against my female representation. Suppressing my voice by talking over it and not giving me space to respond is a silencing action. It is also deeply disrespectful to me as an individual in a workplace, as well as to the role. There is no evidence that such behavior occurred in previous Academic Boards with the same membership under previous male incumbents of my role. The fact that others joined the barracking turned it into an act of mobbing (Pheko, 2018), or a group form of bullying, that heightened the sexist aggression and actually made it more dehumanizing. The bystander phenomenon, occurring when people shy away from taking action against bullying and therefore strengthen bullying practices (Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020), was evident in the new member not contributing and simply leaving, and the colleague refraining from engaging. A look, a word, a position against the prevailing narrative could have changed the tone and challenged the sexist undercurrent of the meeting.

When I met the main antagonist of this Academic Board some 2 weeks later at a university event, he greeted me with a 'Hello love', but otherwise did not speak to me. This may be a habitual term, commonly used in some parts of the country, but it felt like a microaggression to pour on to his earlier more explicit aggression, a subtle undermining and belittling of my presence and role. Such microaggressions are grounded in gender norms, symbolically indicating the views of others toward our gender identities and raising questions about our belonging within an organization (Soini, 2022).

I certainly questioned how well I fitted into this institution. Although I had supported colleagues when they had been subject to sexist behaviors and had taken action with perpetrators, I only partially revealed the details of the Advisory Board with my immediate superiors or manager. The power and positioning of the board members as local businessmen, alumni, and regular university visitors placed a barrier against complaining about their behavior. Moreover, I was concerned that my reaction of freezing, not speaking out, and being emotional would be construed as weakness, not handling the situation well, not being 'tough' enough. I was supposed to be a 'leader', and yet I did not live up to the masculine, authoritarian, go-getting stereotype of what these board members at least expected an academic leader to be. Too often, sexism is considered an individual problem rather than systemic (Pérezts & Mandalaki, 2023). Moreover, sexism is often silenced by both organizational and individual inability and unwillingness to react to it (Shymko et al., 2023). I regret not calling these behaviors out for what they were at the time, blatant sexist aggression, which possibly contributed to later feelings of burnout and abjection.

The third vignette illustrates the interaction of academic leadership with personal challenges and their effects.

4.3 | Cancer diagnosis during the executive board

During the fourth year of my tenure in the role, my husband became ill with a cancer that needed treatment. Cancer is increasingly common, although most cancer mortality rates are projected to decrease (Smittenaar et al., 2016). However, a cancer diagnosis can come as a great shock which upturns the usual family life, work, and activities into a whirlwind of appointments and treatment. There is also the constant worry about the prognosis and outcome.

I hear the news in the Executive Board meeting.

My husband has gone to see a hospital consultant, after some symptoms, some tests, and a biopsy.

He has gone without me because I have to be at the Executive Board meeting.

I should have been there.

He has made light of the risk of cancer and, somehow, I did not think it would happen to him or to us.

I have to be at the Executive Board meeting because whatever the business is, it is somehow more important than being at the hospital.

I should have been there.

There is a three-line whip to attend the Executive Board, no excuses.

He texts me during the Board, saying 'please can you call me'.

I hurriedly leave the meeting and call. It is clear that something is seriously wrong, worse than we thought.

I should have been there, with him.

It is huge body blow. Emotions whirling. Shock, fear, guilt.

I ask the VC's assistant if she will enter the meeting and retrieve my belongings. I can't face the meeting. I need to go home.

The VC comes out to see me. I break down. I'm shaking and crying hot tears. I can't speak properly. My body convulses with shock.

I should have been there, with him.

This fateful day was the start of a long period of physical and psychological turmoil which illustrates the interaction of intense high level managerial work with personal challenges. Managing illness of the self or loved ones is not uncommon. With retrospective reflexivity, what appears significant during the period of my husband's cancer treatment is the extent to which my embodied affect and my needs for care were negated or silenced within the organization. That is not to suggest that individual colleagues were not trying to be supportive, as many were, but that raw emotion and physical frailty is seen to serve no purpose in the neo-liberal university, especially when in a position of leadership. This resonates with Lynch's (2010, p.63) argument that in academia 'unforgiving carelessness has been endorsed as morally worthy', meaning that in the lives of senior managers and many academics there is a culture of constant availability, rationality rather than emotional wellbeing, and expectation of being unencumbered by caring.

First, there was the issue of presenteeism, being visible and being physically present as a leader. This expectation underpinned why I did not attend the hospital appointment with my husband when the diagnosis was first made, a decision I regretted when the outcome emerged. Attending the weekly Executive Board was deemed a prerequisite of this leadership role. Meeting weekly was perhaps unusually frequent but was intended to bring a degree of control and action during considerable change, even though the meetings themselves came to dominate. Attendance by deputies was not allowed; I had to be there to support the 'leadership team'. If I were not there, there was a risk the team would make decisions on my behalf, and I might not be able to defend or advance the position of my academic unit in uncertain times. This expectation of *being there* continued throughout my husband's treatment, meaning he usually traveled alone to the hospital. Despite lack of sleep or the physical pain of worry, my physical body was needed at work, even when my mind was distracted elsewhere.

Second, emotion and vulnerability are out of place in a rationalistic organization where metrics, performance targets, and budget specifications underpin behaviors and actions. According to Knights (2021, p.168), 'managerialism in university leadership reflects and reproduces the dominance of masculine discourses and practices', resulting in displacement of an ethic of responsibility to students and staff or what could also be seen as an ethic of care toward those who are suffering emotionally or physically. Emotional display of sadness or anger from a leader negatively influences perceptions of their effectiveness, particularly in relation to female leaders (Lewis, 2000). While I continued with my job, I was at times emotional and over-tired, ambivalent to organizational challenges raised at the Executive Board that seemed less important than facing potential personal loss. Yet, the response was that my problems were minimized; my tears were met with embarrassment and bewilderment.

5 | THE UNDERMINING EFFECTS OF GENDERED MANAGERIALISM AND RESULTANT BURNOUT

Drawing the incidents in these three vignettes together, what they have in common is an underpinning of neoliberal managerialism and masculine dominance. Neoliberal marketization and competition in higher education has generated a performative culture that not only affects the individual working lives of teaching, research and professional staff, but also those in supposed leadership. Particularly for non-elite or mid-ranking institutions, the emphasis of those in charge is on survival of the university, which encompasses maintaining or increasing market share for students, balancing budgets by increasing income or cutting costs, and rising in rankings and league tables. Academic leaders also become subjected to managerial discourse and performativity. Moreover, when this rampant managerialism is underpinned by masculine norms and symbolism within the gendered organization of universities, the possibilities for leading in ways that redress these norms becomes increasingly challenging, if not impossible, without denying aspects of the self.

The three vignettes illustrate incidents that were memorable for their impact on my sense of self as an academic leader. Perhaps naively but not unreasonably, I had hoped to work as part of a collective effort of the Executive Board, peers, and colleagues to develop a supportive environment for research and education to thrive. However, my embodied identity failed to comply with the required performativity; I was too reflective, too female, too emotional. As Fotaki et al. (2014, p.1240) remind us, “academics are gendered embodied subjects, and as such are not only subject to forms of gender domination and subordination; they also may (often unwittingly) reproduce those forms”. I acknowledge that some of my responses in the incidents reflect my material socialization as female. I did not need to be that ‘nice girl’ doing as I was told, nor did I have reason to know that I would be subject to sexist attacks that rendered me silent or that my responses to personal bad news would be so emotional. Affective embodied responses are ingrained in women's psyches and influenced by dominant masculine discourses (Fotaki, 2013).

I began to feel the effects of burnout, which arises from a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors within work, resulting in exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). My body was sluggish, aching, heavy; my mind was abstracted, aloof, cynical. There is also an existential dimension to burnout arising from the need to believe that our lives are meaningful and the perceived failure to find continued meaning in our occupational roles (Pines, 1993). I experienced a dawning feeling of not fitting in, nor wanting to ascribe to the mold of exploitative, aggressive, and competitive behavior. For example, when a new school was added to my existing portfolio during restructuring, a senior manager said of those colleagues: ‘they hate each other, they hate me and they will hate you’, as if hate and toxicity between colleagues is a badge of honor to aspire to. I did not want to lead in a condition of hate, faced with verbal, physical or non-verbal forms of hostility.

Such difficulties of burnout, toxicity, and poor mental and physical health are exacerbated by the logic of carelessness (Lynch, 2010) that pervades academia generally, where the ‘greedy logics of commercially-driven higher education crowd out space and time for care, be it of family members, students or even oneself’ (Lynch, Ivancheva, O’Flynn et al., 2020, p.158). The struggle of women academics to reach and sustain themselves in the higher levels of management or leadership reflects the gendered order of academia rather than any general ‘fault’ of women themselves. The onus remains on women aspiring to leadership positions to rely on their personal resources to overcome issues such as burnout, or cultural sexism (Yarrow & Davies, 2022), rather than through systemic institutional or sectoral change. Concepts such as the ‘glass cliff’ (Ryan & Haslam, 2005) or the newly coined metaphor of the ‘glass cash cow’ (Yarrow & Davies, 2022) to reflect the precarity of women in leadership in business schools, resonate with my experience of the inevitability of potential ‘failure’.

The need to find means of countering the detrimental effects of gendered managerialism were central to surviving my leadership role without a significant loss of my identity as a feminist academic and well-being as a human being. I was not always satisfied with my own behaviors, such as not being able to speak out at the Advisory Board or challenging the behaviors afterward. By not addressing this, I could be perpetuating the same behaviors,

resulting in what Fernando and Prasad (2019) suggest is a reluctant acquiescence to the organizational silencing of sex-based harassment. However, rather than focusing on my powerlessness in that situation, I focused on where I had agency and where I could use forms of resistance to counter the prevailing cultural norms and practices endemic in the sector.

6 | RESISTANCE

In this section, I discuss how I tried to resist sexism, aggression, and performativity in my leadership role. Knights (2021, pp.167–8) argues that ‘power and resistance are far from polarized mutually exclusive categories or events’. Resistance does not have to be openly adversarial but can be subtle or covert. Individuals can resist against wider power by trying to change a dominant system from within. They can also hold power, through a leadership role, that can be utilized to try to shift structures and cultures in an organization. I identify four forms of resistance that were at play in my experience as an academic leader: resistance through embodied affective authenticity; resistance through solidarities, and social relations with others; resistance through activism; and resistance by stepping back.

6.1 | Resistance through embodied affective authenticity

Despite the potential for burnout to be felt in the body, the body can also be a place of resistance and comfort. Bodily presence conveys meaning, such as the right of marginalized bodies (such as women or anyone positioned as Other) to be in a position of leadership. Embodied leadership can be contested and defended through the body (Mavin & Grandy, 2016b). I resisted masculine symbolism in presentation of the self and continued to be my authentic self in every encounter, rather than trying to project a rational, authoritarian, managerial authority of leadership, even if it meant not conforming to the gender norms deemed appropriate for the socially constructed context in which I was expected to lead (see also, Liu et al., 2015). My body is mine—tall height, blond hair, feminine dress, breasts that have fed babies, eyes that cry tears, voice that is quiet—and I will not moderate it for the organization. When I cared about an issue, which was most things relating to my academic unit, I illustrated that I cared through listening, engagement, reflection, and action. It was not my style to be loud, looming or authoritarian. I suggest the aggressive behavior of Advisory Board members was a blatant sexist contestation to my embodied affective authenticity as a female leader.

Although I deliberately struggled to contain my emotions during the Advisory Board to avoid further perceptions of weakness by the members, generally I tended not to repress displays of emotion in the workplace and in many instances could not have prevented emotion being shown even if I had tried. Suppression of emotion leaves people abject and inauthentic, whereas vulnerable and emotional bodies remain agentic and active (Hales & Galbally, 2023; Plester, Kim, Sayers et al., 2022). Moreover, emotion and feelings, as Ahmed (2017) reminds feminists, can be a site of rebellion. Emotion allows us to resist our identities being silenced by toxicity or negated as a human being.

However, there is a risk in exposing oneself so openly to others. Shows of emotion—whether these are frustration at poor decision-making processes, anger at sexist behaviors, or shock and fear of personal loss—can be perceived as emotional irrationality rather than natural, human embodied responses. In a highly managerialist and performative context such as contemporary academia, such emotion is counter to the neoliberal rationality and competitive positioning required from colleagues and promulgated by their ‘leaders’. It illustrates that I, as a leader, did not fit the mold.

6.2 | Resistance through solidarities and social relations with others

The second form of resistance I practiced to survive leadership in the neo-liberal academy was to build solidarities and social relations with others. 'Embodied and ethically engaged affective relations reflect an alternative kind of resistance with a potential to disrupt masculine managerialism by rendering academic work more open and innovative' (Knights, 2021, p.168). Although the first vignette illustrates the loneliness in the first months of the role of not having a trusted team to turn to in supporting complex planning and difficult decisions, it was subsequently possible to put together a 'leadership team' for the academic unit. The various existing roles were vacant, or incumbents had stood down, so it was possible to build a group of colleagues of women and men who were willing to work together constructively. We worked hard, we laughed or cried, built camaraderie and trust, and close caring relations within the team in the face of external and internal challenges. These close colleagues became friends who supported me through my husband's cancer, and I supported them through their own personal trials.

Those solidarities were not only with colleagues but also with students. Not having much time for my personal research due to the intensity of the role, supervision of PhD students was a joyful opportunity to engage with continued intellectual activity and mutual learning. Postgraduate researchers doing feminist research within other cultures continually challenged my knowledge and assumptions, provoked admiration for their resilience in their own academic journey and caused me to reflect on my responsibility and privilege. The struggle of these researchers, who could also be defined as 'Other' through their several intersectionalities, to navigate their own inclusion into academia is a reminder of the academy's failure of inclusivity that warrants resistance.

6.3 | Resistance through feminist activism

A response to this endemic problem of lack of inclusivity is resistance through feminist activism. Feminist activism in the academy requires a belief and intent that structural inequalities can be improved (Reedy & Haynes, 2023). Illustrative of this point, and a feminist approach to leadership, was the fact that I volunteered to be the lead Executive Board member on a pan-university careers project which aimed to address inequalities in career pathways and promotions processes in relation to research and teaching. The project resonated with my interests in women's careers and was underpinned, for me, though not the university, by a conviction that academic careers are gendered (Angervall & Beach, 2020) and sexism is pervasive (Pérezts & Mandalaki, 2023; Yarrow & Davies, 2022). My intent was to resist through being 'an outsider within' (Laube, 2021), where my leadership role confers legitimacy to try to effect change.

Further resistance to institutional pressures of sexism and burnout related to my continued feminist writing. Researching and writing on topics that address exclusion, social justice, gender, and decolonization is a form of resistance. Mentoring and supporting others, and intellectual and practical engagement with feminist activism, is a form of feminist praxis. Academic activism can take the form of feminist critical engagement in neoliberal times (Grosser, 2020). Moreover, as Contu (2020, p.737) argues, intellectual activism can translate into a form of critical performativity, "embodying an academic praxis that is progressive, intersectional, critical, and concretely engaged in the service of social, economic and epistemic justice".

6.4 | Resistance by stepping back

The final form of resistance I have termed 'resistance by stepping back', referring to my decision to step down from a high-level leadership role at the end of its term, rather than continuing for a second term (a possibility) or stepping up by seeking a higher-level role in a university hierarchy. Stepping back, away from 'leadership', is what some academics do toward the end of their career but less so when there are several years of potential career

remaining. Stepping back, however, is not always perceived as a conscious choice. The academic career hierarchy is so pervasive in its urge for upward trajectory that such decisions may be treated with incredulity. There may be pressure to stay or 'disappointment' if one is perceived as a 'role model' who is not behaving as one is expected to. However, once the decision is made, any gaps are soon refilled and contributions are forgotten as the next incumbents arrive, illustrating that academic managerialism marches on.

Schultz (2023) argues that leading with feminist care ethics in higher education can illustrate new ways of leading and living by ensuring that care for the self, as well as others, is central to leadership. This might include stepping back. We need not continue the relentless overwork and self-sacrifice that institutions rely on to function.² Long working hours and engagement with difficult or impossible tasks and choices in the working environment risk burnout (Okpozo et al., 2017). Managing tensions inherent in neoliberalist academia also works to the detriment of individual well-being, causing disappointment and lack of organizational identification (Mitra et al., 2023). Physical and emotional exhaustion arise from paying attention to injustices and trying to do things differently in academia (Reedy & Haynes, 2023). For me, constant monitoring of budgets, performance and metrics, experiences of sexism and lack of empathy with personal difficulties triggered their own embodied forms of struggle, felt in the body through lack of sleep, anxiety, pain, and tension. Ahmed (2017, p.247) argues for an embodied understanding of feminist survival that recognizes bodies and emotions as a form of resistance:

'Your body might tell you it is not coping with what you are asking; and you need to listen. You need to listen to your body. If it screams, stop. If it moans, slow down.'

Understanding when to stop is not giving in to the managerial academy, but is a regrouping, hiatus or redefinition of identity. Stepping back and undertaking a new role allows me more time for research and mentoring activities, where I feel I can support others in navigating or challenging the managerial academy, which in itself is a form of resistance. Moreover, stepping back as an active choice does not preclude continuing, and indeed expanding on, the other three forms of resistance identified: resistance through embodied affective authenticity; resistance through solidarities and social relations with others; and resistance through feminist activism.

I listened to my body and stepped back.

7 | CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

My aims in this article were to convey the challenges of senior academic leadership from a position as a woman in the highly gendered managerial academy. Using a blended autoethnographic approach, as well as three evocative vignettes, enabled me to illustrate the lived reality, insecurity, and struggle of leadership, which is a cloak for managerialism and performativity. The vignettes critique three critical incidents: poorly constructed decision-making; experiences of sexism and aggression; and negation of embodied affect. Their critical contribution is to expose the consequences of gendered managerialism in the neo-liberal academy and the false promise of 'leadership', in which women continue to experience gender challenges, sexism, and the risk of burnout in their everyday experiences. The intention is not to deny or avert anyone from the opportunity or experience of leadership but to expose and thereby challenge the potentially oppressive cultural context in which it operates. Despite the challenges, I do not regret taking the role as I learned a great deal about human interaction from it. I show how it is possible to counter the detrimental effects of gendered managerialism through four forms of resistance: resistance through embodied affective authenticity; resistance through solidarities and social relations with others, resistance through feminist activism and resistance by stepping back. I hope the insights from the forms of resistance in this article resonate with and offer potential to others. These forms of resistance enabled me to survive in my leadership role and retain my identity as a feminist academic.

I hung a picture today...now I feel able to look at it and move on.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

¹ 18% of my annual budget

² Thank you to one of the reviewers for making this point.

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