Trumpeting the Horn: Dominant masculinity, self-promotion, and discourses of success in neoliberal English academia

Jessica Butler • Lancaster University

•

Presented at the Gender and Education Association Conference 2018 on the theme 'gender, post truth populism and pedagogies: challenges and strategies in a shifting political landscape'

•

December 10th 2018 • University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia

SLIDE ONE

First of all, a disclaimer: as usual, I was far too optimistic about what I could achieve in 20 minutes, so this paper is less faithful to the abstract than I had intended. It's also more scripted than I'd like, because practice has taught me I can't be trusted to ad lib.

SLIDE TWO

So, what I will actually be doing is giving a brief overview of the PhD project this presentation is taken from, thinking about normative cultural ideals of masculinity and the institution of academia, and introducing the character of the 'Trump academic'. I'll then move to look at how academics working in English higher education conceive of success and how this relates to these ideals before considering some consequences of the rather narrow and restrictive indicators of being a 'successful academic', institutionally speaking.

SLIDE THREE

My PhD research investigates competition culture and gendered ideals in English HE, particularly focusing on the handover from what some might call the 'golden age' of traditional academia to the marketised, neoliberalised system of contemporary times. My argument is essentially that the common thread linking HE's elitist roots to its more massified current form is the centrality of competition, and that competition and its emphasis on winning is associated with dominant archetypes of masculinity. The broader project considers what this all means for those in the HE space who either don't conform to the kinds of identities most suited to win this competition, or who don't wish to operate in the ways the system demands. This paper looks particularly at ideas of success and the necessity of self-promotion – both in general, to stand out in an over-saturated market, and in terms of the kinds of selves that need to be promoted, or curated, in order to be seen as successful.

SLIDE FOUR

This was summed up really nicely by one research participant, who alluded to some of the major themes of the project in noting that if there even was a 'golden age' of academia, it was restricted to a small and privileged subset of the population. So one of the benefits of the neoliberalised academy – by which I mean a deregulated HE sector in which market forces set the agenda – is that it necessarily admits a wider diversity of participants because it needs enough student income to sustain itself. However, she also picks up on the fact that competition has remained a driving force, and that we have moved from a rather

genteel situation in which wealthy white men compete for honour to a brutal, Hunger Games scenario. Both, she says, are male, but differently so.

Whilst the wider research incorporates policy analysis and a broad base of literature from various disciplines as well as qualitative interviews, for the purposes of today I've stuck with primary data and some of my initial thoughts about it.

SLIDE FIVE

In total I conducted 29 interviews, but, though representative of wider themes, this paper only includes quotes from around 10 of them as I only recently completed fieldwork. Because I'm still at an early stage with this and anonymity is a key issue, I haven't yet created pseudonyms and have only given very basic details about the quoted participants so as to ensure no-one is identifiable.

SLIDE SIX

So, moving on to the underlying premise of the research, here's Connell and Messerschmidt on hegemonic masculinity. I use this concept both because it's a really nice summary of masculinity in the way that I'm using it and because it's useful for thinking about other hegemonic, or 'most honoured', ways of doing certain identities. I'm particularly interested in how traits or behaviours can be normative and unquestionably honoured without being normal, especially when considered alongside this quote from a participant musing on why academia is structured around competition and why we have the 'ground rules' we do.

When I say that competition, or the culture of academia, are masculine, I don't speak about gender in the strict sense or in terms just of sexed bodies. I'm thinking more here about myths of Mars and Venus, or of 'blue brain' and 'pink brain', in which certain traits or predilections are culturally associated with maleness or femaleness regardless of any innate quality, or even indeed whether such a thing as 'innate qualities' even exist. That which is ascribed to the masculine is ordinarily most highly valued, and women who embody those qualities often find themselves in a double-bind where in her they are negatively evaluated for being a perversion of the ideal feminine. That we know it's largely bullshit that men are either endowed with superior capabilities, or that the capabilities they are supposedly endowed with are actually superior, somehow counts for very little when it comes to the realities of navigating the world, for the hegemonic nature of these ideals makes it very difficult to opt out of this value system. It may be that the majority of men don't succeed in emulating the most honoured form of masculinity, or women of femininity, and that most academics don't succeed in emulating the most honoured form of academicness, and therefore very few actually win and almost everyone is highly suspicious of the system of measurement, but whilst this is the norm the only way to participate in the game, let alone win it, is to play at least partially on its terms. These complicities and ambivalences come up frequently in this research, as does the idea of trading off, paying a tithe to the system in order to gain space to follow a path that feels more authentic.

SLIDE SEVEN

Liz Morrish presents a rather searing view of the kind of academic who wholesale commits to demonstrating a particular kind of academic identity that fits with the 'current inducements' that represent if not the most honoured then at least the most rewarded way of being an academic. Whilst I'm sure there are some out there who embody this description, I'm glad to say I haven't come into contact with many myself and whilst my participants gestured towards uncollegial behaviour being an increasing problem they were more forgiving of individuals who had become more instrumental and individualistic in their approach, seeing it as a consequence of a bad system and a survival instinct rather than simple lack of integrity.

SLIDE EIGHT

What came through very clearly in the data is that for most academics there is clear difference between external definitions of success – the Trump academic kind – and personal definitions, and subjective success was often achieved by effectively balancing the requirements of the system and the ambitions of the individual. The second quote here shows a live trade-off and juggling of priorities between the immediate impetus to fulfil the requirements of the 'marketised, metricised, paranoid, panicked culture' and the impulse to follow a sense of what's important. For those who aren't familiar with the UK HE system, the REF referred to here is the Research Excellence Framework, which is a large and expensive exercise that takes place every seven or eight years intended to audit the quality of research produced by universities. The internal processes around selecting what will be included in REF submissions is a source of significant stress for most academic staff and can have employment consequences. What comes across in this quote is a sense of almost being brainwashed by the need to obtain the kinds of markers of success that are valued by the university, to the detriment of the motivations for entering academia in the first place.

SLIDE NINE

However, even if these measures are obtained, this doesn't necessarily confer a *feeling* of being successful. It's a hollow victory, in a way, that only buys a little more time by keeping the wolf from the door. Personal success comes from solving tricky problems, not from getting a big grant or having a permanent job, and even when it's recognised that on paper the CV looks great, impostor syndrome still creeps in because of a constant background anxiety about being out of place or not achieving enough. And this ambivalence is seen as being a universal problem.

SLIDE TEN

This is perhaps because as well as simply having the necessary accolades on paper, success is perceived as requiring a certain attitude. It is maybe here where there are the most parallels with the Trump academic and also a certain kind of Trumpish masculinity, incorporating not just overt identity features such as being white and male but also an entitled confidence, machismo or bravado, a bolshie persona, self-certainty, and the ability to 'talk the talk' and self-promote even when under-qualified. Elsewhere this participant described this quality as 'swagger', and her difficulty projecting the right image was a barrier to her success despite proven ability.

SLIDE ELEVEN

Confidence was a key factor in being a successful academic, as was looking the right way, knowing the right people, being ruthless, and having certain kinds of privilege, particularly financial stability. People attributed their own success largely to a cocktail of luck, which was sometimes recognised instead as being privilege, hard work, perseverance, and supportive relationships. Most of the main requirements of the job aren't cited – only one participant listed being clever as necessary for success, whilst others mentioned it only to dismiss it as an unspoken requirement – so being successful is clearly seen as being elevated above the norm in a sea of highly-qualified people.

SLIDE TWELVE

Something that was also commented on quite frequently, though not explicitly here, was that although one's own success is often felt to be more a matter of persistence than being 'really good', success in others is taken at face value due to the level of hubris involved in cultivating the successful persona. So, as in the bottom quote here, you don't see the behind-the-scenes panic, the vulnerability, the doubt, the rejection, you only see the shiny achievement at the end, the 'boastful certainties' to quote Morrish, and concealing the moments when the shit hits the fan has high value institutionally.

SLIDE THIRTEEN

When it comes to the traits required for success, these involve a mixture of identity features such as gender, race, and class, and strategic behaviour or ruthlessness. There is a division between the people who work collegially and 'keep things running' and those who 'dodge anything that doesn't advance them personally' because they've realised that 'you survive by hitting a certain set of numbers' and the academic service tasks don't contribute to those numbers. This might not be quite the Trump academic Morrish describes, but it is every bit as individualistic and instrumentalised.

SLIDE FOURTEEN

Closer, perhaps, is the 'entrepreneurial' academic who's 'in with the in-crowd', who can sell themselves, 'big up' their research, and use Twitter effectively to cultivate the right image and reach the right audience. The ability to self-promote and make use of connections is a significant advantage, as is looking like the most senior echelons of governance.

SLIDE FIFTEEN

Looking right grants access to the managerial offices, whereas not fitting the trope of a successful academic is enough to render success questionable even for those who admit elsewhere that compared to their peers they're doing pretty well. The image of the ideal academic exerts a powerful hold, both in terms of the contents of their CV and their literal image. The final quote here highlights the already-gendered vision of a 'proper academic' and the simultaneous valorisation of overwork and lack of traditional femininity associated with paying no heed to appearance due to being too busy and time-poor for such 'frivolities'. Wearing a dress is associated with partying, and partying by implication is seen as not commensurate with being a serious academic, so for female academics to be taken seriously they should 'lean in' to a less feminine style.

SLIDE SIXTEEN

However, whilst these kinds of traits might confer or indicate success in the short-term, sustaining success comes with other considerations. Launching a career in academia requires single-mindedness to be competitive in an over-saturated market because anything you can't do 50 other people will. There are all kinds of problems with this being made visible at the moment by early-career academics in particular, many of which came up during the pension strikes this year, most notably issues around precarity, exploitation, overwork, and the enormous inequalities in who is able to devote all their time to academia even if they want to. But there are consequences further down the line, too, even once the holy grail of the permanent job has been won, and it's worth noting that precarity is not exclusive to the early career stage. I heard several stories, only permitted to be told through anonymity, of voluntary or mandatory redundancies in the professoriat, permanent jobs disappearing in restructures, and strict performance management measures being used as cause for dismissal. This anxiety about employment status, productivity, demonstrable success, and achieving certain metric targets is not something that evaporates with seniority. Perhaps this is why, as flagged up by the first quote here, burnout is a problem, and ill health, especially mental health. Senior academics sustain their position by being 'zonked to the eyeballs on antidepressants'. And in the second quote we see the potential ramifications of the imperative for hyperproduction; what happens when the pressure to submit grant applications bears fruit? Collapse. The feeling of not being a person any more. Feeling like a task list. I find this account totally heartbreaking, not just for the dehumanisation but the lack of institutional support, which results in distressed ambivalence about the promotion that was the 'reward' for this supposed 'success'. Unfortunately this is not an uncommon narrative; almost all of my mid- and late-career participants spoke of periods of significant ill-health that represented turning points in their attitude to their jobs, and many of them cried whilst talking about it. For some, the state of crisis was what heralded their decision to leave academia, and for others it represented the need to create new boundaries between their work and themselves.

SLIDE SEVENTEEN

The first quote here is from an early-career academic in a fixed-term post. This conscious separation of identities wasn't uncommon amongst newer academics, who if my research is anything to go by are coming into academia with few illusions, whereas the second quote illustrates that renegotiation of boundaries amongst more senior staff, who began their careers very personally invested in their work, loyal to their institutions, and learnt to divorce themselves from it as a resistance to being consumed by an increasingly hostile culture. It's also interesting to think about who arrives in the HE space with more resilience because they're privileged in that environment, because it 'belongs to them', and who can therefore appear to be relatively oblivious or ignorant to many of these issues. I like this description of being privileged in a way that doesn't entail holding active power because I think it nicely sums up some of the difficulties feminism has in making headway, where men individually can't understand their position in patriarchy because they personally don't feel like they hold power. This kind of privilege might not be

tangibly powerful, but as well as endowing certain advantages it also decreases vulnerability to the hostilities of the surrounding environment.

SLIDE EIGHTEEN

As highlighted by an earlier quote, resilience is a contested word in HE discourse. Universities train their staff to increase their resilience, and staff push back against this individualisation of structural problems, as if it's a lack of mettle that's the issue rather than the toxicity of the system. I find it hard to quibble with that. However, as in the third quote here, 'you do get more robust as time goes on' and to some extent 'persistence, resilience, stamina in the face of rejection' are life skills as well as academic ones. People do learn from experience that failure is not the end of the world, that rejection is inevitable, that in a competition not everyone can win, and after so many times being laid low by this we realise that to cope we are going to have to take it less personally. We might not agree that it's okay that this is the basis on which we operate, but given that it is, to some degree it's sensible to install a gap between ourselves and our work, or between 'this feels really horrible today' and 'I am actually a failure at life'. Notably, though, much like the privilege of feeling comfortable, the sense of entitlement to try things and fail at things, is not evenly distributed. The third quote here is talking about psychological resilience, but of course the ability to sustain the consequences of failure is unequal in a variety of ways, and differing levels of confidence are perhaps a symptom of other forms of vulnerability. It's hard to feel like you're entitled to fail and it's not a disaster if failure means not getting the job and your bank account is empty, or your family are reliant on you, or if £50,000 of student debt is more money than you've ever comprehended and it will follow you around for the rest of your life. It would be lovely if everyone could grow up in a culture of safety that allowed them to fail and still feel like everything will be all right, but creating the psychological conditions for that also entails creating the physical and financial conditions for it, and this is something that neoliberal culture is absolutely not in the business of, either within academia or society more broadly.

SLIDE NINETEEN

One of the other problems with this culture is that it assigns value based on what is most marketable. So in the HE economy, particular kinds of labour are worth more because they lead to quantifiable results of the kind that are valued by its various audits. This was seen earlier in reference to staff who dodged anything that didn't feed into the numbers they needed to qualify their success. Here it's more explicitly gendered, particularly when it comes to pastoral roles and administrative or service tasks. We could debate whether the kinds of labour that are less highly-valued despite their obvious necessity are largely performed by female staff because they are less valued or whether they are less valued because they are done mostly by women, but either way there is a clear association between the two. And this impedes the careers of those who are heavily involved with this labour both because it takes time away from the kinds of work that lead to more valuable outputs and because it isn't valued in itself. In the second quote, a participant who was already struggling having just returned from maternity leave was also given a substantial administrative role that further depressed her publication record, meaning she wasn't

eligible to apply for promotion. She was satisfied with a salary increment, granted in recognition of her service to her department, but didn't get to make the career step from Senior Lecturer to Reader.

SLIDE TWENTY

One of the biggest problems with the differential value assigned to certain kinds of academic labour is that what was originally designed to be a measurement quickly becomes a target and metrics come to dictate behaviour, whilst at the same time the ease with which numbers can be manipulated renders them almost meaningless. Fitting into the machine becomes necessary not just for success but for survival, and people learn to game the system. But, as highlighted by the third quote, these numbers aren't fit for purpose and they lead to a situation in which the tail wags the dog. Metric 'success' is 'a kind of success that seems completely detached from the values of higher education'. Of course, what you think 'the values of higher education' are, or should be, is up for debate and this is precisely what my project is getting at, but even if, as in the first quote, everyone is implicated in audit-driven academia regardless of whether they agree with it, I've found very little evidence to suggest that academics on the whole have come to adopt neoliberal values. Only one participant more or less uncritically aligned himself with, and measured himself against, the dominant institutional definition of success – though he felt out of place politically – and the rest greeted contemporary HE policy with suspicion and scepticism, acknowledging many of the inequalities and problems with the system.

SLIDE TWENTY-ONE

Other consequences of this competitive environment and obsession with metrics is the draining force of constant anxiety about being good enough, the background sense of precarity, and the aversion to taking risks due to the potential for, and consequences of, failure. Priorities are skewed by what's deemed 'fundable', research potentially loses depth because narrowing the field of enquiry makes people less versatile to employers, productivity is ultimately decreased because endlessly job-hunting or having meetings about potential redundancy and being in a state of nervous hyperarousal aren't conducive to thinking and writing, fledgling scholars are put off sharing their work because the idea of putting themselves forward feels so unsafe as to make a vat of boiling oil preferable, and the sector potentially loses out on those who question, or are afraid to question, whether they belong in the HE space and who would take its brutal rejections as a sign they aren't 'proper' or aren't good enough and take their skills and perspectives elsewhere.

Of course, there is so much more than just what I've briefly touched on here, but hopefully this gives a taster of some of the main issues surfacing from my research and how they relate both to gendered bodies and a more broadly gendered culture that is exclusionary to a much wider spectrum of identities and subjectivities regardless of gender.

SLIDE TWENTY-TWO

I tend to come away from thinking about this feeling both very fond of and grateful to all my participants, who have taught me so much and been so generous with their time and thoughts, and rather depressed by a lot of what they shared with me. So in the interests of not striking such a low note so early

in the conference, I'll end on a few calming manatees and a tip: what came through time and time again was the importance of support networks, both within academia and outside work. The ability to share successes, but more so the space to talk about failure, rejection, and anxiety, and to have the benefit of other perspectives, the mentorship of senior academics, and the advice and support of colleagues, was reported by probably every person I spoke to. Academia can often be lonely, and ever more so as success becomes increasingly individualised and colleagues are framed as competitors, and it's not always transparent about what's required or how to do it. So, offer support, seek support; be someone's cheerleader, get a cheerleader, and take a cue from my friend on the left here: please don't be so hard on yourself.