

Academic Dignity: Countering the Emotional Experience of Academia

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Abstract

A significant emerging body of research examines the conditions and impacts of neoliberalism on academic institutions, particularly how the rise of the ‘marketized’ university has shifted the way in which academics are expected to engage in research and teaching. Validating academic’s experiences, we highlight their emotional responses to the ideological shift that has taken place within the academy, illustrating how lived experiences repudiate neoliberal conceptualizations of the academic as *homo economicus*. Referencing our ongoing research in Canadian universities, we overview workplace dignity, a countervailing notion that mobilizes positive emotional concepts. We then articulate an *academic dignity*-centered approach for future work.

Keywords: academic dignity, neoliberalism, higher education, emotional experience

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Introduction

A significant emerging body of research has articulated and critiqued the conditions and impacts of neoliberalism on academic institutions, particularly how the rise of the ‘marketized’ university has shifted the way in which academics are expected to engage in research and teaching (Kouritzin, 2019). We examine how academics in such institutions are impacted by these changes, with particular attention paid to emotional impact and response. Our aim is to highlight some of the key concepts evident in such work as they pertain to the emotional responses of academics to the ideological shift that has taken place within the academy. We focus on their perspectives in order to validate the emotional and lived experiences of academics and repudiate the neoliberal conceptualization of the academic as *homo economicus*, which “postulates that people are rational self-interested actors” who are “assumed to leave out emotions in their strategic functioning at work” (Bal, 2017, p. 106). Our focus serves to illuminate the interactive quality of academics’ emotions, as they are “experienced, felt, perceived, realized, pursued...injured, violated, wounded, or denied by others” (Lucas, 2015, pp. 621-622). Referencing our ongoing research in Canadian universities as well as extant literature, we overview work on workplace dignity, a countervailing notion that mobilizes positive emotional concepts. Using this as a springboard, we finally begin to articulate an *academic dignity*-centered approach. By ‘academics,’ we mean all those engaged in academic work within the academy, from tenured faculty to research specialists, and contracted instructors.

The Neoliberal Academic Identity

Academic identity is a dynamic and situated concept encompassing “values,” “location,” and “role”; identity is constructed and articulated in the beliefs we hold about our work, as well as our specific context and position within that context (Billot, 2010, p. 712). The ideological construct of homo economicus underpinning neoliberal academic institutions creates new academic subjectivities, as “academics have been called upon not only to be more productive but also to display that productivity in measured, measurable, and/or accountable forms” (Acker & Webber, 2017, p. 541). Ball (2003) and others argue that this transforms individuals into “enterprising subjects” who “calculate about themselves, ‘add value’ to themselves, improve their productivity, strive for excellence, and live an existence of calculation” (p. 217). Furthermore, he argues that this engenders academic ontological anxiety in the endless search of the “triumphant self” (p. 218), driven by comparison and competition with others and the notion that one’s best could always be better. Thus, what it means to be an academic becomes “subtly but decisively changed” (Ball, 2003, p. 218).

Nixon (2004), in a critique of the values underpinning neoliberal universities and a call for a return to a shared ‘moral’ vision of the university, explains that academics have, in many ways, learned to be ‘bilingual’: “to utter the standard platitudes of managerialism, while adopting within our own street culture of academic journals and collegial dialogue an older demotic” (p. 246) as a means of ensuring academic survival in the face of institutional and systematic accountability mechanisms. However, he warns, while this translanguaging may seem necessary, it signifies an ideological shift that fundamentally alters how academics speak about their work. As marketized and managerial policies have created something of a “professional identity crisis” (Nixon, 1996, p. 714) for institutions of higher education (Kouritzin et al., in press), the professional identities of individual academics are correspondingly in flux (Billot, 2010). Within an examination of narratives of academics’ perceptions of their professional lives, Billot (2010) notes emotional responses such as being ‘torn’, ‘stretched thin’, or ‘alienated’, showing an apparent gap between the need to fulfil institutional expectations while maintaining the ability to complete what they viewed as ‘real’ academic work, work aligning with academics’ professional values and goals. Similarly, in Denmark, Degn (2016) noted that academics tended to “refer to ‘academia’ or ‘The University’ as an abstraction as their primary source of identification, rather than their specific place of employment” (p. 310), thereby identifying themselves with traditional academic values rather than the specific qualities of their particular contexts.

While the voices of faculty in the extant research tend to highlight the tension between ‘traditional’ ways of being an academic and the managerial vision of the ‘entrepreneurial academic,’ the voices of another group of academic labour – contingent or contractual academic labour (many of whom have experienced nothing else) are seldom evident. However, these academics tend to experience the most ill effects of the neoliberal institution by way of limited stability and possibility for promotion, limited access to resources and inadequate remuneration (Archer, 2008; Coin, 2008; Tirelli, 2014); their voices highlight important insights into how the features of the neoliberal university are experienced and ‘lived’ by precarious academics. Archer (2008) noted that many contractual and junior academics drew on a discourse of a ‘Golden Age’ of academia - a past time in which traditional values were actively enacted across academic institutions - as a benchmark for critical discussions of “proper” research, the desirability of leisure, space, and hierarchies, and whether the “golden age” was romanticized or even achievable (p. 271). In Canada, Acker and Webber (2017) argue that early-career academics feel the need to measure up in order to attain some degree of stability and career success; they, therefore, engage in strategic actions that would yield maximum benefit in tenure review, while still holding seemingly-paradoxical romantic (passion for their work) and critical (dislike of neoliberal practices) conceptualizations of their academic lives. This again points to the alienation between the expressed needs of academic institutions and academics’ desire to perform what they perceive to be real academic work, “the specific requirement to do social good” (Batson, 2020, np).

The nature of academic work: ‘Precarious’ work and workload. In shifting contexts, the nature of academic work – what is done and what is valued, as well as by whom it is carried out – has undergone significant shifts in relation to supporting the profitability and public image of the university. One of the key features identified within the body of research regarding how the nature of academic work has changed within neoliberal institutions is the erosion of the traditional career path of tenure and the corresponding growth of a contingent underclass of academic labour who echo of the larger spectre of

precarious work in the neoliberal economy, experiencing both marginalization and increased pressure to comply with institutional expectations for their own professional survival (Smyth, 2017; Tirelli, 2014):

As for the part-time faculty, their grievances are by now well known, so I will only summarize them here. Even if they teach the equivalent of a full-time course load they typically do not get anything close to pro-rated compensation. They normally lack job security and a reasonable benefits package. Frequently they do not have access to an office, or if there is an “adjunct office,” it is likely shared by more than a few co-workers, making office meetings with students less private, thereby contributing to an unprofessional atmosphere. They often lack an office phone, an adequate computer, a desk, or even a drawer that locks. (Tirelli, 2014, pp. 529-530)

Smyth (2017) argues that such situational realities leave all academics vulnerable to the ever-escalating demands to perform and produce according to institutional needs and expectations. Tirelli (2014) additionally suggests that the increased use of contingent and part-time academic labour diminishes the authority of faculty as a whole, as more and more academics in precarious positions becoming increasingly vulnerable to the whims of those in administrative positions. Therefore, the practice of hiring contingent academic labour is not only a response to the growth of the administrative elements of the corporatized university, but it also sustains and consolidates the power wielded by these factions. It should be acknowledged that women and other minoritized groups are overrepresented in the ranks of contingent academic labour (Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Coin, 2018; Murray, 2018), and are also more likely to engage in unpaid academic labour (Coin, 2018).

Unions do not appear to be tackling the problem. Dobbie and Robinson (2008) note that even though unionization is stronger and more embedded in Canadian institutions than elsewhere, it is not effective protection against the increased use of contingent labour. They charge that the focus of union efforts has been “mostly on advancing the interests of the tenure-track majority” and thus has “increased the incentives to hire more contingent faculty by increasing the gap between the cost of tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty” (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008, p. 133).

Academics’ responses. While the responses of academics to the ongoing marketization of the university reflect a wide range of potentiality, it is evident that many of the responses are fundamentally emotional in nature and deeply connected to academics’ senses of identity. Contrary to the neoliberal ideal of the rational, calculating self, emotional responses are integral to how academics live and make sense of their experiences at work (Bal, 2017). Butterwick and Dawson (2015) discuss the normalization of neoliberal ideology and policy through the “devaluing and problematizing of emotions” (p. 53); within neoliberal epistemes, emotions (especially negative emotions) are seen as disruptive and counterproductive to the supposedly neutral actions of engaging in the business of knowledge production. Similarly, Grant and Elizabeth (2015) identify a broad spectrum of emotional responses, demonstrating that academics experience audit processes in different ways – from frustration to shame to acceptance. Therefore, exploring academics’ emotional experiences is a vital means of understanding how the technologies and ideologies of the neoliberal university are encountered, understood, and lived by academics. While there are many conflicting and multi-layered emotions emergent from the literature on how academics experience the neoliberal university, we have selected three emotional clusters continually referenced within the global literature and have included references to transcripts in our Canadian research.¹

Fearful and anxious. Smyth (2017) claims that “constructed” fear and anxiety underpin much of the marketized academic narrative, citing how universities as individual institutions believe themselves to be under threat from competing institutions that may be more innovative (p. 14). On an individual level, academics are told that they “will perish unless they operate and comport themselves according to a particular set of narrowly conceived rules, in order to survive and insulate themselves from a precarious and

¹ This article is conceptual. However, this footnote explains references to data from our research. The first author is principal investigator on a SSHRC Insight Grant investigating workload creep in Canadian U15 universities, an extension in scope and context of her previously funded research (Kouritzin, 2019), while the other authors are collaborators on that research. To date, over 80 interviews have been conducted with full time faculty members representing contract instructors, instructors, professors and administrators belonging to the U15 group of Canadian universities. Interviews, averaging approximately two hours in length, were arranged by telephone, Skype, or in person, normally with the first author.

fiercely competitive academic world” (Smyth, 2017, p. 2). In this way, Smyth argues, fear acts to maintain managerial logics and structures that would otherwise be unacceptable to academics, thereby engaging their compliance in an ongoing academic game at an individual and institutional level. Academics acknowledge fear from having “seen people punished if they don’t comply” (transcript 1609), from the expectation of “consequences if you challenge ideas” (transcript 1619), and by processes “intended to keep people nervous and under the thumb of those who judge” (transcript 1630), where “some people you see are blown up along the way” (transcript 1611). Likening academic jobs to an emotional and physical “minefield” (transcript 1611) suggests that academics feel their “well-being is hanging by a thread” (transcript 1626) and feel “unsafe about the environment we are in” (transcript 1626). The combination of “increased workload, decreased support, decreased transparency and decreased respect” causes the “anxiety and stress” they feel (transcript 1626).

Wagle (2013) draws together several personal narratives in an Education faculty to illustrate how such ‘fear’ is pervasive within the corporate university, and how it can work against academics’ capacity for critical thought and advocacy, arguing that precarious positions may cause academics to feel beholden to students. She describes the lukewarm response she and a colleague received when they described their experiences of sexual harassment in an educative manner at a university-wide meeting, underlining the gendered aspect of fear in the academy. While her work is limited in describing how the tenets of neoliberalism and the marketized university drive fear, she documents the need to validate emotional experiences against the calculative rationality of the neoliberal paradigm.

Such fear may be felt more deeply by those in precarious professional positions and may be further amplified for those academics who experience marginalization and discrimination due to their gender, racialization or sexual orientation. Murray (2018), connected constant, pervasive fear to academic identity and shades of imposter syndrome. She recounts a participant describing her positioning as both a woman of colour and a ‘radical scholar’:

In answer to the question ‘Do you ever feel fear?’, she replied: ‘All the time. Fear of failure. Fear of knowing. Fear of not knowing enough. Fear of not being white enough. Fear of what some digits will mean for me and my future. I was always afraid of telling my true opinions because of fear of being seen as too radical and unwilling to compromise ... I think ultimately my fear was that I am not as smart as they are, as the academia is. I am not worthy of stepping into the high echelons of academic work’. (p. 177)

In this way, as Smyth (2017) argues, fear can act as a ‘glue’ in that it “holds this perverse and quite ridiculous idea of the supremacy of the market together in universities, and allows it to proceed uninterrupted in doing its deforming and disfiguring work” (p. 14), operating through power structures to reinforce certain behaviours and actions and making individuals responsible for ‘reforming’ themselves.

Exhausted, overwhelmed, and alienated. Anxiety both drives and is perpetuated by heavy workloads, as demands for productivity can leave academics not only feeling overworked, but also engaging in work as output, provoking a sense of alienation from it. Faculty of all ranks experience changing and increased demands on their time in the face of a culture that values productivity and challenges individuals to adapt and produce for profit maximization (Bal, 2017). Horton and Tucker (2014) note that this manifests in both overwhelming workloads and increased pressure to forego personal obligations in order to work in relation to “processes of promotion and performance review that effectively valorise individual productivity” (p. 85). In a feminist analysis of labour conditions with reference to tenure and promotion procedures in Canadian universities, Butterwick and Dawson (2005) note a “constant onslaught of demands” (p. 55) and uncertainty about how to balance institutional expectations with individual professional goals. They suggest that “[w]omen in particular, regardless of where they are positioned in the academic hierarchy, must struggle to balance accelerating and competing work demands” (Butterwick & Dawson, 2005, p. 57), many of them meaningless as our research suggests:

Lots of time is wasted on triviality, and each act of triviality has an effect on the mind, which is to take away a little piece of your enthusiasm, to eat away a little piece of your core active efficient individual, erode your sense as an academic, being intelligent, capable of independent thought, and leadership, eroding your sense of actually having those things.

Suddenly you are powerless in a cosmic game that seems to have no end. So, in this sense, the waste-of-time workload, the unproductive workload, these trivial tasks that go nowhere. (transcript 1614)

While academics face imbalance in their professional and personal lives with physical and mental health consequences, such conditions are cast as individual problems (frequently framed in our research as “work-life balance” (transcript 19011) rather than as symptomatic of systemic structures. In terms of professional impact, the emotional impact can culminate in *alienation*, a sense of being displaced or mismatched, and a consequent loss of meaning and/or recognition from work that they engage in (Ball, 2003). Alienation may lead to avoidance of the physical workspace and self-isolation (Ashman & Gibson, 2010), “disengagement” (transcript 1609), and “choosing not to participate” (transcript 1602).

These emotional responses are antithetical to the vision of the ‘rational’ academic self; emotions may be viewed as shameful or the result of an individual’s inability to cope (Hacker, 2018, p. 284). However, the construct of the rationality of *homo economicus* is incompatible with overwhelming academic workloads that frequently demand personal sacrifice. Left under-recognized or appreciated, ongoing personal sacrifice and “institutional belittlement” (transcript 1614) may lead to distress or frustration, possibly even demoralization and alienation from work and/or colleagues.

Disrespected but resilient. While much of the research grapples with academics’ negative emotions surrounding their work experiences, it is equally important to explore how academics engage in coping strategies to maintain a sense of self in potentially dehumanizing work contexts. Academics “don’t need thanks or gratitude” (Transcript 19001), but do desire some recognition—just “a basic recognition that I am a scholar and teacher trying my best (Transcript 19002). Academics occupying precarious positions may experience greater pressure to conform to expectations since failure to do so can be detrimental to their own professional survival. Moreover, as the corporate academy becomes entrenched and is internalized, those academics with little first-hand experience of the way things used to be may see a certain futility in resistance. Archer (2008), engaging with younger UK academics, employed Foucauldian discourse analysis revealing that they share similar core principles of “intellectual endeavour, criticality and professionalism” as previously evidenced in studies of ‘older’, tenured academics (p. 270). Moreover, she noted how they fostered ‘resilience’ against the mental and emotional strains of the expectations for them to be flexible and productive by engaging in “principled personal projects” (p. 278) that validated their professional ethics; they found ways to detach, to construct barriers between their work and personal lives. Academics in our research note that they do not have time to “think big thoughts and come up with wonderful things because a lot of time we’re screwing around being data entry clerks and doing scut work” (transcript 19001). Archer (2008) argues that academic moves to establish spaces for maintaining personal integrity while responding to the imperatives of their work are acts of micro-resistance and resilience. She suggests that fostering such resilience is difficult, because academics “still experience the slipperiness of neoliberal discourses” (p. 282), rendering resilience a double-edged sword:

The resilient subject is one that has been taught, and accepted, the lessons concerning the danger of autonomy and the need to be ‘capacity-built’ in order to make the ‘right choices’ in the development of sustainable responses to threats and dangers posed by its environment. Thus the process of constructing resilient subjects requires divesting peoples and individuals of any belief in the possibility of determining their own conditions for development and security and accepting instead the necessity of adaptation to the ‘realities’ of an endemic condition of global insecurity and to the practice of ‘sustainable development’. (Chandler & Reid, 2016, pp. 1-2)

Conceptualizing Academic Dignity

Dignity is a somewhat broad, contested construct defying simple definition; it is imbued with differing philosophical and theoretical assumptions. Bal (2017) builds on a Kantian framework of human dignity, emphasizing intrinsic dignity as an existential quality within individuals, and rejecting the instrumental ‘use’ of people. Bal frames dignity as involving not only rights but also responsibilities or duties to the other, drawing on Daoist principles by moving beyond people to include all creatures and the surround-

ing environment. This conceptualization is unique in that it not only addresses dignity violations or oppressive conditions experienced by workers but also calls for a more ‘dignified’ foundation for work itself, a fundamental reimagining of the self and the system.

Bal draws on the example of universities as a case study for how dignity can be promoted and protected within a context that is heavily infused with neoliberal values in administration, research and teaching. He suggests that a ‘dignified’ university would reject the commodification of education and research, working instead to create a safe space for dialogue and relevant research that both involves and serves the interests of the general public. This echoes a call from Smyth (2017), advocating for approaches based on critical questioning and dialogue, beginning with “*What is happening here? What are we doing?*” moving to “*How did things come to be this way, and what keeps them that way? Whose interests are being served?*” and finally to “*how might we do things differently?*” (pp. 216-217). Without academics doing so, the concept of ‘dignity’ risks being co-opted to serve corporate interests, with surface reparations and policies put into place under the logic of well-being as contributing to greater productivity (Bal, 2017).

Beginning with this more inclusive concept of dignity in the academic context, and recognizing that dignity itself is something that must be ‘experienced’ emotionally, in that it “is a psychological or cognitive outcome whereby people achieve a ‘sense of’ dignity” (Lucas, 2015, p. 621), we focus on three emotional constructs that appear in the literature as indicators of workplace dignity: the emotional responses of feeling valued and supported and being democratized.

Valued

Feeling ‘valued’ moves away from an instrumental view of employees as having their worth connected to the achievement of organizational goals and instead moves towards recognition of the individual dignity and intrinsic worth of workers. More specifically, it relates to feelings of being recognized and appreciated for work. Zembylas (2003) links the emotional aspects of teacher identity to power relations, noting that identity is fundamentally connected to recognition, or lack thereof, by others. Such recognition can take many forms, both non-material – from reorienting evaluation practices from a deficit-oriented, norms-based audit culture to focus on how individuals are engaging with their practice as a means of supporting further professional development (O’Leary & Wood, 2017; Tuytens & Devos, 2017) – and material, such as ensuring that salaries and benefits are commensurate with workload and professional status (Tirelli, 2014). Shame and diminished self-esteem may result from lack of recognition; therefore, the development of the idea of a community of professional practice to which academics can feel a sense of belonging and the ability to contribute meaningfully is implied. This involves a rejection of the notion of “performative competition” (Ball, 2003, p. 219) promoted under a neoliberal paradigm, in which individuals are encouraged to advance or protect their own professional interests, and instead moves towards a commons, a “social imaginary”, or a “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23) that we all accept the burden of protecting.

Supported

While ‘valuing’ encompasses attitudes towards instructors, this second aspect of professional dignity focuses on more structural aspects of the academic workplace. In particular, it recognizes that a sense of professional legitimacy and dignity is contingent on the material and non-material components of a job. For example, Breshears (2004) argues that a desk is not simply a desk, but also “represents the material comforts that reward social standing” (p. 24). It conveys a sense of status and professionalism, and is evidence of financial investment on the part of the institution in that individual. Aside from physical space and resources, being supported also involves job stability and compensation. A dignity-based approach to academic employment needs to elevate the concerns of ethical working conditions of employees – sufficient time, space, and resources to complete quality work, adequate compensation, clarity around academic responsibilities (to mitigate what Kouritzin calls “workload creep”) and ongoing stability – over profit motives. Furthermore, there is a need to address what Madeloni (2014) terms the dehumanizing “audit culture” of teaching evaluations, coercing academics to internalize the values of the system, adjusting their behaviours to suit the metrics (p.82). This not only has emotional costs, but reframes professional work as “being compliant with administrative demands and allowing others to

name what makes your work valuable” (Madeloni, 2014, p. 83).

Democratized

The final documented aspect of ensuring a dignified workplace concerns academics’ active and purposeful involvement in decision-making processes and providing avenues through which to address grievances and perceived dignity violations in a professional manner without fear of reprisal. This approach seeks to overturn hierarchical management and administrative structures in favour of democratic engagement, thus “shifting of the power balance towards those who are directly responsible for the execution of the core process within universities, which is the learning process” (Bal, 2017, p. 259). Drawing on the notion of “workplace democracy,” Bal (2017, p. 162) argues that a hierarchical management structure fails to “dignify the workplace, as it undermines the need for participation and personal control, and bears the risk of violating dignity, as decisions are being made about people without their explicit approval” (p. 141). Similarly, Temple and Ylitalo (2009) advocate for the construction of new modes of leadership in the academy based on democratic ideals and a commitment to a “social justice construct that interrupts the legacy of racial, language, cultural and disability and it equalizes opportunities for marginalized members of society” (p. 282). In this sense, they envision ‘leaders’ as those who act as bridge-builders in uniting communities. Bal (2017) also emphasizes the quality of duty as being central to leadership, arguing that leaders have a duty to represent and protect workers. He advocates for a relational basis of organization, in which communication and mutual respect form organizational structures, within which all members of the community are engaged in constant learning/growth and reflection as individuals and as a community. Being *democratized*, therefore, means a transformative shift in organizational power back to collegial governance, ensuring that academics have a voice in decisions that affect their lives and engaging them in constructing a more ‘dignified’ workspace.

Having elaborated these three pillars of academic dignity, we next take up the challenge to commit to a social justice construct that interrupts the status quo in terms of racialized minorities, language, disability, Indigeneity, sexuality, and gender. To do so, we engage academic dignity as a verb, a process, rather than a condition.

Academic Dignity Reimagined

As do most researchers (e.g., Bayefsky, 2013; Lukas, 2015), Bal (2017), in the most comprehensive statement of workplace dignity to date, focuses on Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights which reads “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (<https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>). Bal and others thereby restrict themselves to conceptions of dignity that are located within capitalist frameworks –belonging to statesmen or aristocrats, as some aspect of individual bearing having little to do with action or inaction. Even while drawing on Daoist principles and on Kant’s understanding that dignity is an intrinsic, existential quality inherent to each person, (in line with the UNDHR), and even while making connections with the Dutch word for dignity which includes the notions of true, value, earth, and kindness (p. 42), Bal (2017) and others seem not to consider the dignity of other species. Bal (2017) suggests that there is such a thing as non-living matter (p.88), but he does not acknowledge that human dignity (and thus academic dignity) depends on a recognition of dignity for all two-leggeds, four-legged, multi-leggeds, swimmers, fliers, and stationary (Kouritzin, 2020); moreover, he does not appear to accept that we have no control over others, or over some situations. Perhaps limited by considerations of workplaces and notions of individual agency, Bal (2017) and others remain anthropocentric, located within industrial, capitalist societies, where dignity exists more in its violations than in its being. As a result, they seem concerned with what we might call superficial dignity, a dignity requiring the presence of other humans who can bestow it. This form of dignity requires a verb (e.g., confer dignity, afford dignity, to rob someone of dignity), and a dignity that recognizes the verb “to dignify” (Bal, 2017, p. 68) rather than recognizing dignity itself as a verb, a way of being in the world. This existing sense of dignity leads to victim mentality; it leads us to believe that we can be robbed of our dignity, that we need to beg for it, that when we are humiliated, we lose our dignity. This, we suggest, is patently not true. A paradigm shift is needed in our thinking about dignity—not tinkering around the edges of the current paradigm of dignity.

That is, dignity is not something that others can give us. Dignity is something we have intrinsically

and that we are obliged, by virtue of our roles as academics, to live. We cannot tell others that we have dignity, and we do not judge ourselves to have dignity; we can only live dignity; the world will judge whether we have it or not. Dignity is present in words, actions, intentions, materials, and relational interactions. “Live your life with your hands wide open,” Nakagawa’s grandmother, a powerful Indigenous Amami woman, told him; “if you give then you can also receive” (Nakagawa, 2020). In this powerful statement of what constitutes dignity, she was telling us to take only what we need for today. She reminded us not to hoard power or resources, but rather take just what we need, and then to hold out our hands so that we can give whatever we can to others. If we live this way, then when it is our turn, we will receive what we need—maybe not what we want, but what we need.

Furthermore, Bal’s (2017) prescriptions for the problem are fundamentally historicist, relying heavily on a nostalgic reimagining of the pre-1980s, Fordist-Keynesian economic-political consensus. This can be seen in Bal’s (2017) treatment of the calamity of neoliberalism as primarily the forced assimilation of the social welfare system under the logic of privatization and marketisation. This positioning of the problem of dignity as belonging primarily to the decisions of powerful people displaces the historical and ideological changes which accompanied these changes in how we collectively chose to restructure our societies, and the ways that politics of recognition were used within these systems in order to disparage, for example, “welfare queens” or other beneficiaries of the social programs which are being or were privatized (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Rather than a return to normalcy which misrecognizes the poor or nature herself as undeserving of care and support, where the internal contradictions of capitalism are merely regulated and left at the mercy of the most powerful, the dignity of Beings needs to be reimagined as being itself part of a commons, beyond the reach of means-tested programs whose primary function was to accomplish meagre economic redistribution without addressing the failure of recognition that such divided programs foster. Unfortunately, this is a profound historicist limitation of Bal’s (2017) work, which limits our capacity to imagine a collectivist future from it.

The failure of this previous system was in its accommodationist stance towards capitalism and where it relied largely on the state to function in a regulatory role. Part of the ideological trend within neoliberalism is to undermine the credibility of the state itself, replacing it with individual managers whose actual powers are constrained by market imperatives or by eliminating its functions almost entirely (Ball, 2006). Within the divided Fordist-Keynesian consensus, which preceded our current period, there was a profound purpose of the state in Western countries in opposing communism in the Soviet Union (Aronowitz, 2000). The narrative on which Bal (2017) constructs his concept of dignity fails to acknowledge the various profound existential and historical circumstances which allowed Third Way neoliberals of the 1990s and beyond to claim the *End of History* (Fukuyama, 2006) and whose effects have profoundly undermined the credibility of the state itself.

Studies in dignity and humiliation (Lindner, 2012; Lindner et al., 2011) likewise fail to recognize that dignity is a verb, focusing on how humiliation robs individuals of their dignity. We suggest that when we recognize that dignity is a verb—and must be lived as a verb—we ensure that humiliation does not rob us of dignity. Former slaves and their descendants such as the Amami peoples (Nelson, 2006) and those engaged in Black Lives Matter protests have been humiliated throughout history without losing dignity—though it is probably in the best interests of the slave-owning classes (to whom, it has recently been revealed by Manjapra (2018), reparations were paid by British taxpayers until 2015) and their emotional/intellectual genealogies to argue that they did in order to render slaves less human. It is not undignified to ask to be treated with respect. It is not undignified to ask for mercy for others or to ask for compassion for oneself. It is not undignified to beg for the right to live. It is not undignified to love. Fear and anxiety are not undignified; they are right and rational emotional/social responses to an abuser’s/oppressor’s lack of dignity. That is, it is undignified to refuse respect or mercy or compassion or the right to live. It is undignified to live greed or to live the pursuit of power, as institutional structures try to force us to do. We academics do not live dignity when we act as salespeople, selling commodified educational packages stamped with our institutional brand to students, or when we engage in selling ourselves or lending our names to the promotion of unnecessary consumer goods. Rather, adding another layer of awareness to viewing academic experiences through emotional victimization, we suggest that certain (tenured) academics have considerably more power to effect change. It is, therefore, incumbent on those with less vulnerability to lead, recognizing that more vulnerable others play an academic game for survival rather than greed for power.

What we believe our argument ultimately points to is that dignity and compassion and duty are bound together; when they are lived together, these concepts are incommensurable with discourses on human rights. Human rights are what we demand when others insist on using greed as their underlying principle when they use a rationality of neoliberalism as their foundation (in fact, it is a mystery to us where pride in neoliberal rationalism can come from). Human rights must always be weighed against how much energy it will take to sustain them. We and all other Beings have the right to live, but we do not have the right to steal energy from future generations simply to better (in comfort terms) our own lives. To think this way is to abandon dignity.

Conclusion

The principles discussed within this paper demand a paradigm shift and reimagining of academic dignity; they also represent change in academic common sense at an institutional and structural level. It is all too easy to adopt an attitude of cynicism and ‘play the game’ while ignoring our own complicity in the status quo, but it is more difficult to enact and imagine, as individuals and as a community, how things could be done differently, how we might live dignity together and with the non-human inhabitants of our planet. Yet, that is the task; it is the job of the university and those who live within it to engage constantly in civic dialogue and deliberation about how to imagine a more ethical society, a commons of dignity.

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