Organisational narratives vs the lived neoliberal reality

Tales from a regional university

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Organisational narratives are foundational to inform the actions and directions of an organisation. Modern organisations often place great weight and invest significant time crafting their narratives that are communicated through mission statements, strategic plans, policies, directives and self-promotion. Sometimes these narratives align with the lived reality of the workers and those who deal with the organisation, but at other times there is a significant gap, or even chasm, between the portrayed ideal and the reality. This paper situates such narratives, and the lived experiences within critical organisational theory and a neoliberal framework. Utilising auto-ethnographic accounts of four academics within a higher education context, it highlights this gap and the need to voice concerns about this misalignment. The paper raises awareness of both organisations and workers to the importance of being true to narratives and ensuring they are an accurate representation of what happens. It offers ideas for resisting the disjunction between narrative and reality and a way of challenging neoliberalism within higher education.

Keywords: narrative, auto-ethnography, higher education, critical organisational theory, neoliberalism, organisational restructure, ethics

Humans are innately attracted to narratives and have used them to explain their lives, histories, cultures, beliefs and organisations throughout time (Gottschall, 2012). Organisations create narratives to direct their efforts, justify their positions and actions, situate their policies, motivate their workers and align themselves with desirable values (Pekar, 2011) or groups of people. Such narratives are important and are often held up by managers as the ideal for how their organisation should be perceived by others and how it should be operated; in effect, organisations become 'PR driven marketing institutions' (Klikauer & Tabassum, 2019, p. 88). The narratives carry weight because conformity with them can be used as a criterion for the acceptance or rejection of projects, resources and people. Additionally, workers use them to self-govern their work and development using strategies such as performance reviews and applications for promotion, as part of neoliberal governmentality of workers (Pyysiäinen *et al.*, 2017). Due to their inherent power, it is beholden on managers, workers and society to critically question organisational narratives. Sometimes there are profound differences between the lived reality of those that work and deal with the organisation. Here we discuss autoethnographical accounts from workers in one regional Australian university. Autoethnography situates such accounts within the context of the individuals (Benoot & Bilsen, 2016), the context in this case, being the university. The individuals involved hold standard academic roles which involve research, teaching and service activities. The accounts are analysed and explored to elucidate the differences between the autoethnographic accounts and the organisational narratives. To do this, we draw upon an organisational critical theory alongside a neoliberal framework.

Organisational critical theory

This research draws upon organisational critical theory, which requires critical exploration of organisational ideology, culture, structure, management and communication (van Manen, 1990). Here, we investigate one university as a context for the examination of the organisational narratives versus the lived reality. We are not claiming this organisation is inherently poorly organised or operated or that those in management intend to hinder and frustrate workers. Rather we use our direct experiences to engage in critical thinking within the parameters of our theoretical framework to illustrate the key message of this paper; the disjunction between organisational narratives and our lived experience. We argue our critical thinking supports the formation of ideas that might improve outcomes for the organisation, its professional and academic staff, students, the community in which it operates, similar organisations, and ultimately, society overall.

We make this claim based on the proposition that critical thinking offers an opportunity to use our experiences to enhance understandings. In the 17th Century, Frances Bacon said critical thinking was 'a desire to seek, patience to doubt, readiness to consider, carefulness to dispose and hatred for any kind of imposture' (Bacon, 1605 in Silver, 2011, p. 1). In essence, critical theory necessitates moving on from a neutral, sympathetic position (Cooksey & McDonald, 2011) to one that offers opportunities for reflection and change. Critical thinking can transport an organisation forward in a positive direction, and its promoters believe the alternative to thinking critically is financially detrimental in the longer term

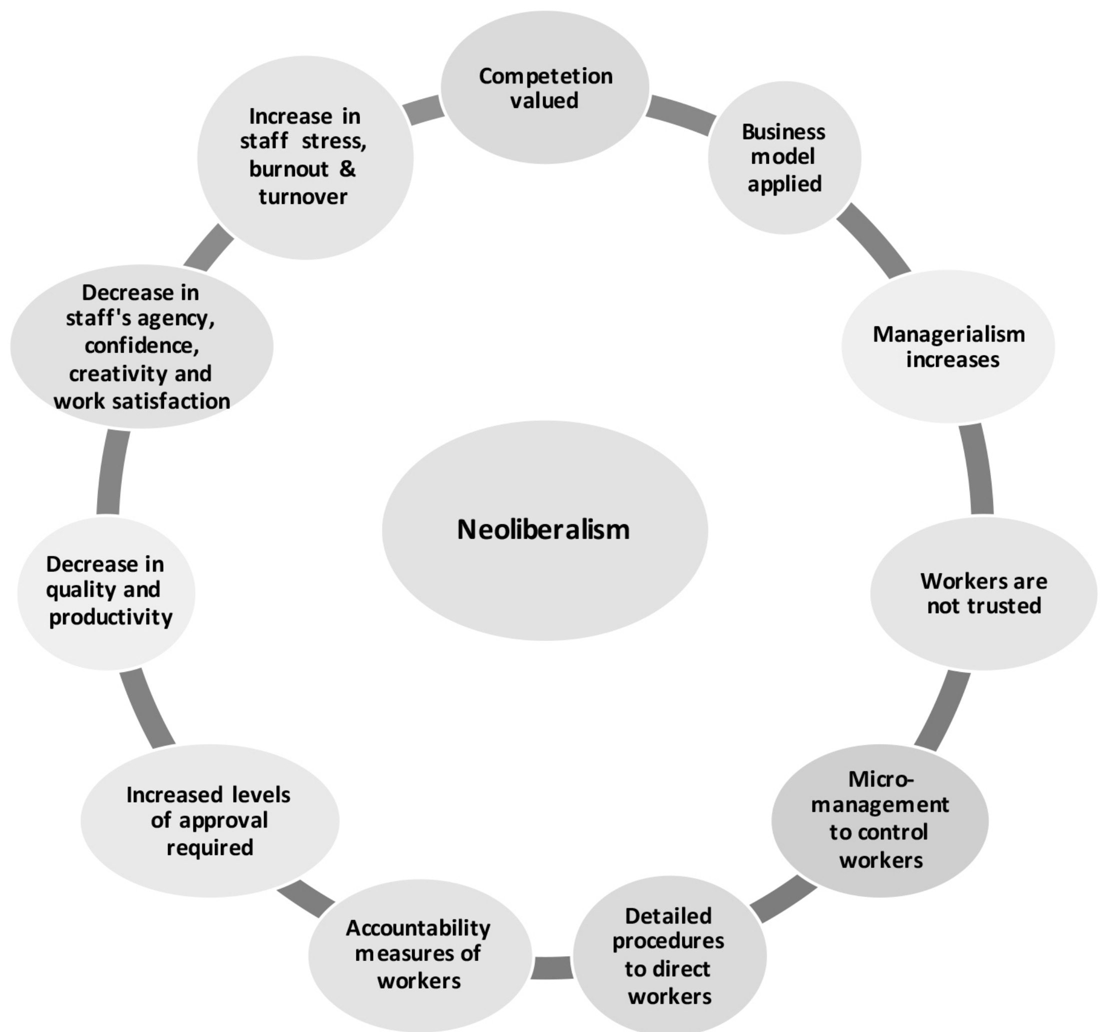

Figure 1: The effect of neoliberal policies on the quality of the work and the workforce

Source: Marg Rogers

and damaging to the richness of life (Scriven & Paul, 2016). Organisational critical theory can be positioned alongside the neoliberal theoretical framework purposefully chosen to guide this research.

Neoliberalism theoretical framework

Neoliberalism is responsible for a narrative in which managerialism flourishes. It is important to be clear that this paper positions management as different from managerialism. Management consists of the 'necessary organising activities required in any large, complex organisation' (Taylor, 2003, p. 5). In contrast, managerialism can be seen as 'management for its own sake, of management as the central and privileged purpose of the university' (p.5). Managerialism imposes demands on staff 'for the purpose of rendering employees subordinate' (Morrish, 2016, p. 1). Integral to managerialism is the tenet that workers cannot be trusted. Therefore, to ensure the organisation's success workers must be closely supervised and controlled; a process that leaves those on the receiving end feeling micromanaged (Giroux, 2013, 2015). Further implications of the managerialist attitude are that there must be management structures that ensure an appropriate level of supervision is available to oversee each and every worker and that the role of managers is to ensure conformity (Graber, 2012; Monbiot, 2016), rather than facilitate positive, encouraging work environments where innovation flourishes. Shore and Wright (2019) state:

> This move reflects the way that many university managers now see their role – which is no longer to provide support for academics but, rather, to manage them as 'human capital' and a resource. From the perspective of many university managers and human resources (HR) departments, academics are increasingly portrayed as a reluctant, unruly and undisciplined workforce that needs to be incentivised or cajoled to meet management's targeted outputs and performance indicators (p.8).

To justify this position, a narrative of improved efficiency to cope with competition is generally adopted, as demonstrated in Figure 1. This, in turn, leads to 'bullshit' words (Luks, 2017) that sound sophisticated, but have little or no meaning. Once a management-heavy structure is in place those occupying management positions must justify their positions by appearing to be extremely busy doing important work. In our experience, this is often demonstrated through sending emails and other communication that repeat information already sent to their workers and calling more meetings. More broadly, this has become so problematic, there is now a significant body of literature on what are termed, 'bullshit jobs' as described by Glaser (2014) and Graeber (2019) (See review of Graeber, 2019, in this issue). Having obtained a bullshit job leads managers to offload 'more and

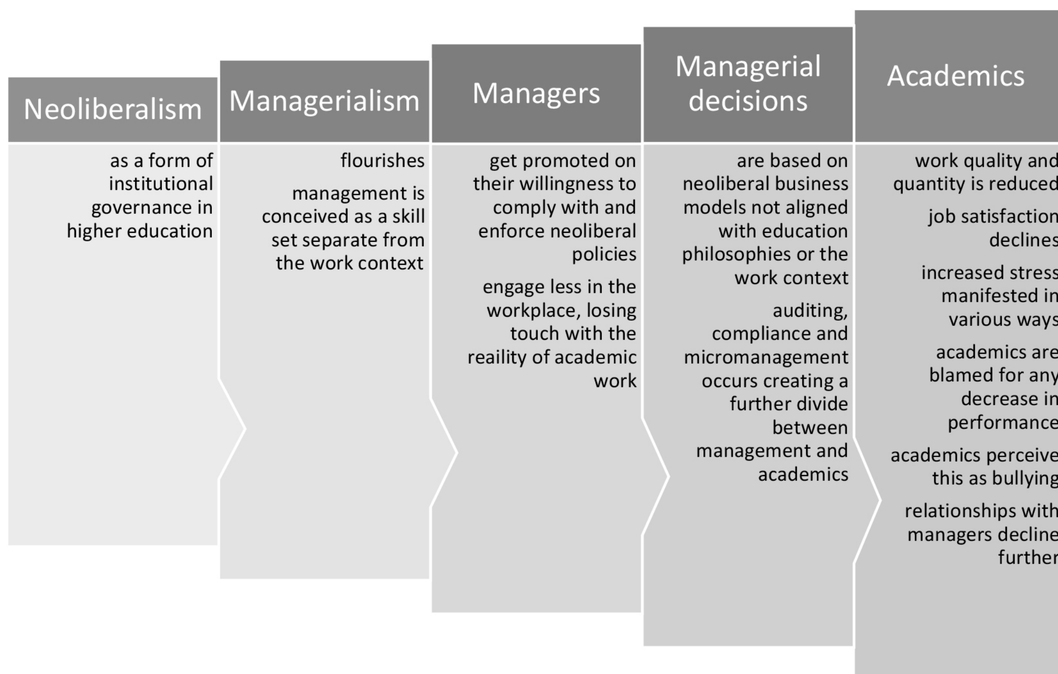

Figure 2: The effects of neoliberalism in higher education

Source: Marg Rogers

more of their responsibilities onto the lowest-ranking female subordinate to give the impression that they were too busy to do such things themselves, leading, of course, to their having even less to do than previously' (Graeber, 2019, p. 33). Whilst the neoliberal narrative positions this as the best way forward for improving productivity, the experiences of workers are the exact opposite as depicted in Figures 1 and 2. This plays out somewhat differently in different contexts but is particularly problematic in the higher education sector (see Figure 2) where the conformity enforced by neoliberal managerialism is the opposite of what is needed for universities to fulfil their critical roles as a check and balance on society (Connell, 2015; Furedi, 2017; Jones, 2014; Orr & Orr, 2016). As a consequence, Shore and Wright (2019) argue that mismanagement is rife, stating 'higher education is now being modelled on the same types of financial speculation that produced the ... global financial crisis' (p. 8).

Thus, in this paper, we share auto-ethnographic examples, illustrating counter-productivities in the higher education context within one university. Boughton (2013) argues that the way forward from the problems created by neoliberalism is to use the power of the collective and collective resistance, but there is an important role for leaders in this context to articulate the vision and facilitate collective action. This paper is situated as an awareness raising paper, a necessary first step to voice these dilemmas as experienced in the higher education workforce and suggest a way forward to resist such difficulties within a neoliberal regime.

Methodology

In this study we employed an auto-ethnographical approach, which integrates what we learn from political and intellectual positions about practice and theory (Holman Jones, 2016). This approach situates the ethnographic narrative within the individual's cultural context (Benoot & Bilsen, 2016). Auto-ethnographic accounts are more powerful when they contain personal reflections, emotional reactions and embodied acts (Benoot & Bilsen, 2016). Through these narratives, we have constructed our own understandings of our lives, the lives of others, our culture and its constructs through figured worlds (Pennington & Prater, 2016) that have been created socially and built culturally.

Figured worlds as defined by Pennington and Prater (2016) and Cleland and Durning (2019) are social/cultural constructs in which roles for participants are defined based on power, status and rank. Participants in a figured world interpret their experiences based on the narratives available to them in that world, and act accordingly. Figured worlds are co-constructed by participants, so are not static. Individuals who wish to be successful within their figured world must act in ways that advantage themselves within its framework. Individuals who do not accept the boundaries and strictures of the figured world may challenge it and this challenge is the purpose of this paper.

Using an auto-ethnographic approach, the authors accounts were created by drawing on their reflections, peer discussions and journal entries. These auto-ethnographic accounts are not isolated events, but rather, are representative of the efforts of academic staff who live in the valley between an organisation's ideals and the reality of neoliberal management. The examples were chosen because they represented a range of experiences within research, service and teaching which are the three main activities of academics at the university. All accounts were collected in a time period covered by the organisation's strategic plan, that is 2016-2020, which is important for the findings, because what is written in the plan, and the reality of workers' lives were very different.

Ethics approval for auto-ethnographical research studies are not needed (Stahlke Wall, 2016), however, it is important to act ethically. The authors have made every effort to ensure that individuals in management have not been named, unless it is in a media report or in documents in the public domain. Additionally, because of the timeframes in which many of the events occurred, a period in which an organisational restructure was undertaken, multiple people held management positions in acting, interim and/or substantive roles. For example, in the last five years we have had at least five deans, and ten heads of school. This degree of management movement, we claim, makes it difficult to identify any individual within the accounts.

Organisational narratives

Using one Australian university as our case, we started with the institutional strategic plan for the period 2016-2020 (UNE, 2015) which states that the university aims to deliver 'excellent research with high impact' (para. 3). It gives special reference to 'international distinction' in staff members' chosen fields and that the research will 'positively impact and strengthen our communities' (para. 8). The strategic plan also outlines the university's aim for 'digital dominance,' which encompasses being 'a global leader in the delivery of high quality and innovative teaching and learning, with digital and online education accessible 24/7 throughout the world' (UNE, 2015, para. 6). Staff working at the university are purported to be experiencing 'a bold and innovative culture' that is engaging and constructive 'where creative ideas and innovation thrive and where staff flourish' (UNE, 2015, para. 8). The university aims to 'improve operational resilience' by 'improving flexibility, responsiveness, efficiency and reliability and through adopting best practice in all things we do' (UNE, 2015, para. 7). Specifically, in challenging times in the higher education sector, the university claims it will 'diversify and

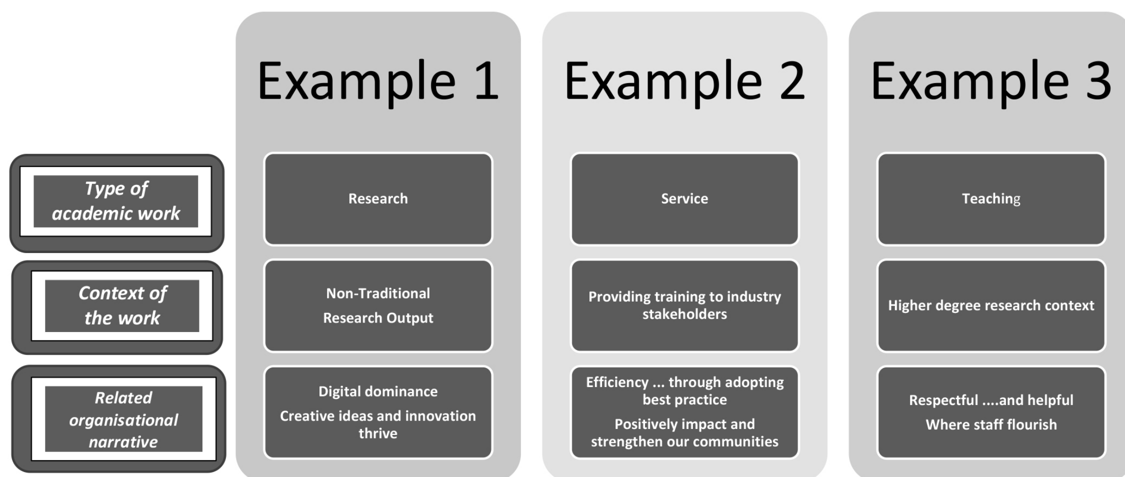

Figure 3: Summary of the three autoethnographic accounts

Source of organisational narratives: UNE, 2015

grow income' to 'guarantee excellence in teaching, learning, research and innovation' (UNE, 2015, para. 5). At the conclusion of the strategic plan, a list of values is offered, including (UNE, 2015, para. 10):

- Creative, innovative, willing to change and take calculated risks;
- Respectful, approachable and helpful;
- Sustainable, robust and dependable; and,
- Ethical, honest, accountable and authentic.

In contrast to this document is the lived reality of staff and the tension-filled clashes between management and staff, in which management's rhetoric is far from the lived reality of staff. For example, a recent restructure involving the creation of faculties was justified by the then vice chancellor in terms of improving management:

> staff also objected to Professor Duncan's decision to restructure and consolidate 10 schools into three faculties, reversing a predecessor's decision. The old structure didn't really work, she thought, while the restructure brought more coherent management to the university. "It helped us make changes to introduce different and better ways of teaching, and respond to students," she said (Fuller, 2019, para. 42-43).

This is based on a position claiming that change is essential for survival, and that the best change to ensure this survival is an increase in management positions at the cost of on-the-ground staff positions, with management reasoning that 'the status quo in times of disruptive change is not a winning strategy' (Matchett, (2018)).

However, this restructure, which resulted in the creation of multiple new senior management positions (deans, deputy deans, associate deans) and their supposedly essential accompanying support staff, was deeply unpopular with many professional and academic staff. 'Last winter a staff meeting expressed no confidence in (the) VC … over an academic restructure' (Matchett (2018)). The drivers of this high level of unpopularity are illustrated in the following sections of this paper which explores the findings, discussions and suggestions of a positive way forward.

Findings: The lived reality

In the following paragraphs we share the lived reality recounted by four academic staff members within the university during the period the strategic plan was in place. The first example explores the area of research, the second examines service and the last reflects upon teaching within the academic's workload as depicted in Figure 3.

Example 1: The creation of a research-based digital app (research)

After the successful publication of two research-based story books to support young children from Australian Defence Force (ADF) families (Rogers, 2018a; 2018b)(see 'Waiting for Daddy: Rose's Story' and 'Now that I am big: Anthony's story') the eBook author joined with another early childhood education academic (both co-authors of this paper), along with university technological learning designers and media designers to transform one of the eBooks into a research-based digital app (Rogers *et al.*, 2018a) as shown in the first column of Figure 3 (see 'Rose's Story: Waiting for Daddy').

This also aligned with other early childhood technology research in which both academics were engaged at the time. Additionally, the project addressed a research gap identified earlier by the team that this cohort of children did not have adequate age and culturally-appropriate resources and parents of the children had requested digital apps.

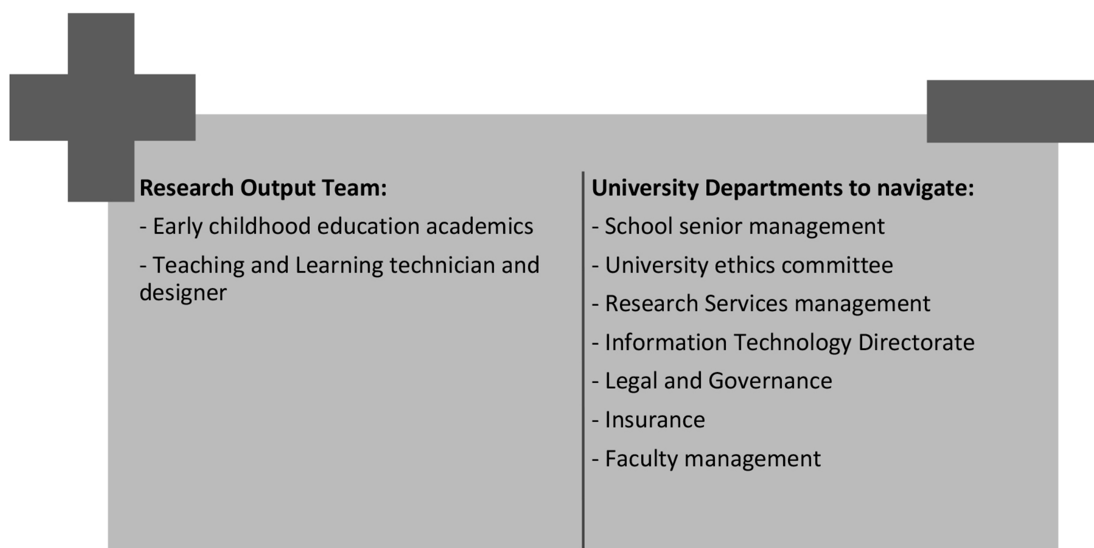

Figure 4: The imbalance of managerial and administrative webs encountered by the research output team

The project effectively aligned with our teaching around early childhood literacy, multi-literacies, communication development, technology and ways of supporting families and the university's promotion of its' role in innovative research with impact and dominance in the field of digital technology (as identified in UNE, 2015).

Several organisational barriers to creating a research-based digital app presented themselves, much to the surprise of our team. Even though digital apps had been in use for at least eight years, there were many times within the process when we felt like we were proposing to do something that had never been done before. That is, we had to push organisational and bureaucratic boundaries to invent the rules as we moved forward with the project. We saw this refusal to accept a digital app as a valid research output as a management 'resistance stance', privileging print literacy practices (Leander, 2009, p. 147) because a different research-based printed children's storybook had been published previously from the same data set which was applauded by university management (see Baber *et al.*, 2015). The barriers we encountered included ethical dilemmas, a lack of understanding of non-traditional research outputs (NTRO), a lack of leadership courage to permit the project to move forward, and complex administrative webs to navigate as outlined in the second column of Figure 4 as we now explain.

The University's ethics committee was very hesitant to approve the publication of the app from research data gathered during the first author's PhD (Rogers, 2017) because the app was considered to be an NTRO. We were advised an NTRO was not a publication and one co-author had not listed an app as a potential PhD research output. This seemed absurd, because the lack of resources and request for eBooks, apps and programs was one of the findings of the project. How the researcher was supposed to predict such a finding and put it in an ethics application before beginning data collection is puzzling. Because of this lack of psychic vision, we were required to draft a new ethics application, rather than amend the previously approved one. This extra application was a very time-consuming process and seemed unnecessary given a children's hard copy picture book and eBooks from the same PhD data set had been published without issue and we saw the app as simply an alternative form of publication. The ethics committee believed an app available on the internet was a major concern, despite the published eBooks being freely available online. Therefore, we were asked to obtain new permissions from all participants as well as the Australian Defence Force ethics committee who were adamant that no special permission was needed since the research had already obtained permission from the non-ADF parents and their children.

There was an overall lack of understanding on the part of the ethics committee about what we were trying to achieve with the data; that is, create a useful and educational narrative for children, parents and educators in a modern, accessible format. This was especially frustrating given the university strategic plan's emphasis on 'digital dominance' (UNE, 2015) aligned with an online university-wide teaching and learning focus and a recent push for high impact research from the Australian Research Council (2015). After addressing over fifty ethics committee conditions on various forms to progress the app, we were then sent on a bureaucratic paper chase. This involved seeking permission from the University copyright officer, the information technology department, the legal department, university insurance, the head of school,

the dean of the faculty, and the professor and a very senior manager (who ironically said we didn't need this approval). At times, many of these personnel were baffled as to why we had been asked to seek their approval. This all occurred during a major restructure of the university, so asking for head of school and dean approval involved seeking permission from different interim and acting managers during the overly long and tedious process (and each required us to explain the project in detail). All these delays impacted the research team's workloads as we were strongly advised we could not proceed until all permissions had been gained. This meant that team members continued with other duties and could not move forward with the project until permissions were gained after a six-month delay.

There were times during the project we regretted trying to be innovative, and we lamented the number of traditional journal articles we could have produced instead. We learnt several lessons during the journey that we share here in the hope of improvements. We recognised there were significant gaps between the management narrative of innovation and the knowledge about innovation approaches possessed by people in management and ethics positions. Thus, valuable teaching and research time was wasted explaining and justifying the chosen app output, multiple times to multiple people. This time could have been better spent facilitating traditional research outputs with which management and ethics committees appeared more comfortable and therefore, have the relevant supportive processes in place. We also needed to be sure that what we were innovatively creating was worth moving the 'organisational elephant' and therefore, worth diligently pursuing and arguing our case.

Also, we came to understand that for every blocker, there was someone cheering us on. However, these encouraging people didn't necessarily have any power. Lastly, we came to realise that by pushing against the 'organisational elephant' we may have made it easier for those to come. Unfortunately, we also realised we were becoming known as annoying to management and the ethics committee, which of course may have future personal ramifications. During this period we were asked to attend multiple forums at which senior management spoke of digital dominance and the need for innovative research and practices. These were difficult to listen to, knowing how far from our workplace reality were the notions expressed in them. We felt frustrated, disillusioned and disappointed that despite management having high ideals, they were not able to implement systems and practices that supported them.

Example 2: Invited lectures and workshops (service)

This example highlights how management narratives and Australian Research Council (2015) priorities around 'demonstrating engagement and impact' in professional fields are often thwarted by neoliberally inclined university managements. Academic roles are typically defined around teaching, research and service, the latter including service to one's university and professional field. However, my experience is that service to one's professional field is somewhat narrowly defined by universities and actively monitored by a set of forms and policies that bear limited relevance to the task at hand. The overall impact is to inhibit rather than support such professional endeavours.

My lived reality and commitment to professional service as an author (Elliott, 2008, 2014) and consultant over several decades in the early childhood education field has been to regularly engage with practitioners in professional learning. There is no one right approach to professional learning, particularly in the early childhood education field, where diversity of service type, qualifications and geographic dispersal of practitioners prevails. Further, under the Australian Quality Framework (AQF)(Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2008) and the current National Quality Standard (NQS) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2018) there are imperatives for practitioners to engage in critically reflective and ongoing professional learning. Added to these drivers, practitioners are time poor and funding for professional learning is often *ad hoc* and somewhat limited. However, being accustomed to navigating these complexities did not fully prepare me for continuing this professional learning work in my current university context.

Initially, I obliged by completing the relevant forms to travel locally and interstate to conduct professional learning. Permission was sought and given to charge fees commensurate with funds available in the early childhood education field, rather than the university corporate charge out fees proposed for external work. I well recognised there would be no invitations to deliver professional learning if I chose to align rigidly with university prescribed fees. Over time with the restructuring from schools back to faculties and new management system accountability priorities, the number of forms and various levels of signing authorities increased, while efficiencies declined. For example, to conduct professional learning, such as a two-hour workshop for a local government in a capital city, the following were required:

- a four-page Project Approval Form;
- a one-page Request for Legal Approval;
- a budget;
- an online travel system entry detailing itinerary, flights, organisational cost codes and costings; and
- a request to the Head of School for approval to travel and work off campus citing details of all staff covering my on-campus duties and teaching roles, even in non-teaching periods.

The volume of paperwork required for a one-off service event, the evidence required to show I was engaging in work (rather than having a holiday), and evidence demonstrating that I would not be neglecting my duties was alarming. It should be noted that the budget proforma and expectations of those signing off on the budget were not relevant for the one-off smaller scale professional learning events I was proposing.

In addition, in this instance, invoicing arrangements were required between the council and university. Despite repeated requests to the university, this was a seven-month process from an initial request to the Finance Department to complete a one page requesting council form, to the actual post-workshop payment into my Academic Professional Funds (an account which is available for me to expend on ongoing research costs). Ongoing management of the process was time consuming and frustrating and I wondered why 40 per cent of the invoiced amount was deducted as a standard university management fee given the level of university service afforded to both myself and the council involved. Also, I reflected on the ramifications for my professional standing in the field and questioned would this council ever seek a university academic again for professional learning. A further ongoing frustration when regularly conducting professional learning was to know when and how much was deposited into my Academic Professional Funds. I considered this essential for forward planning around how best to utilise professional funds for research projects and conferences. Despite several requests for transparency around fund transactions, only a balance has ever been available on request to the relevant administrative officers. Due to this lack of transparency there is ongoing staff speculation about such funds being 'black holes'.

Another option I considered to circumvent this onerous process was to complete a Private Paid Outside Work Application. The nine clauses in the Declaration cover every option from not presenting oneself as a representative of the university to conflict of interest, not using university resources and providing evidence of personal professional indemnity insurance. The declaration was clearly framed from a management, not worker, perspective with no room for negotiation.

Overall, in my experience, the current neoliberal management and accountability systems we are required to work within inhibit the conduct of professional learning in the field. The university publicly applauds high profile engaging projects with the field yet ignores the highly impactful smaller scale endeavours and actively creates barriers for engaging. The challenge becomes to find ways around the inefficiencies of form filling management systems and seek other ways to maximise one's professional engagement and impact. These experiences prompted my reflection about university ideals of staff with distinction in their fields of study and ability to foster positive community engagement and how this was

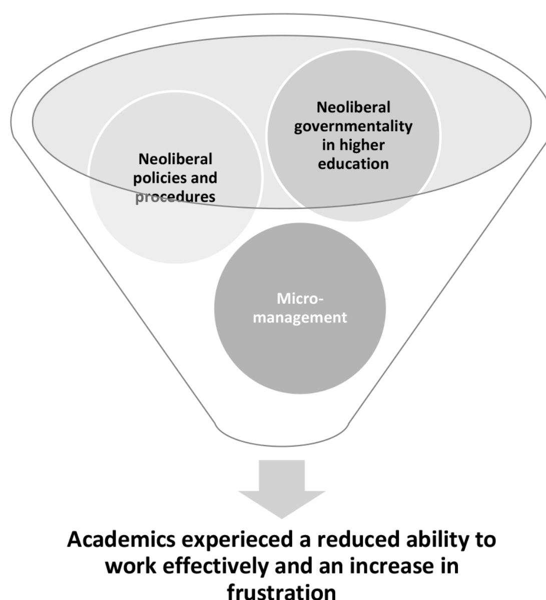

Figure 5: The interplay of neoliberal governmentality, policies and procedures and micromanagement in the examples

Source: Marg Rogers

impeded in my realities. Unfortunately, the experiences were so time-consuming and inane that my frustration and stress levels rose to such an extent that I resolved to reduce my workload to part-time university work. This has offered the flexibility to continue to engage in what I consider highly impactful and rewarding professional learning work, without the burden of navigating increasingly complex management systems.

Example 3: Disrespect of scholarship (teaching)

I have supervised to successful completion many higher degree (masters and doctorate level) students across a wide variety of topics over my decades as an academic. In addition, I have examined many theses. Recently, when one of my students was ready to submit their thesis for examination, I worked through the multiple forms required with the student including:

- Thesis Submission Form
- Statement of Authorship Form
- Right of Access to Thesis Form
- Request to Restrict Access to Thesis
- Copyright Compliance Table
- 100 Word Abstract for Graduation
- Research Data management plan

The existence of so many forms for thesis submission adds pressure for the academic and student at the end of the student's candidature at a time when they are already under

time pressure. In this case, the thesis submission form must be co-signed by the head of school. In the past this has been a simple formality: many times previously, I sent an email to the relevant delegate who signed the form and returned it within 24 hours. However, this time I was told the school co-ordinator of higher degrees by research was required to send the thesis and the form to a faculty manager, who would need to read the thesis before signing the form. I was told the thesis should have been submitted several weeks prior to the deadline for this to occur. I felt offended by this new procedure (which had not been communicated to the school) as it suggested to me that my expertise in determining that a thesis was ready for examination was being called in to question, despite being a professor with many years' experience. In addition, the process for checking my expertise was calling on the experience of an academic who did not have expertise in the area of the student's research, suggesting that the checking process did not recognise the specific knowledge required to evaluate the work.

Given that the student was submitting the thesis at the end of the legal candidature, I chose to submit without having this form signed so that the student was on record as having submitted in time. After waiting for two weeks I contacted the school higher degree by research co-ordinator who had not received the signed version of the form. This person then contacted the faculty senior manager who had not yet read the thesis. I complained that such a delay was unfair on the student and the form was returned later that day. While I understand that there may have been reasons behind the changes, these were not communicated clearly, nor was adequate warning given for my student's thesis deadlines. This seemed at odds with the management claims of having a respectful and helpful culture. I was left feeling very frustrated, hurt and disrespected, given my seniority, level of expertise and experience in academia.

Discussion

In this section we have used organisational critical theory and apply a neoliberal framework to the findings. The three examples provided above illustrate the extremely complex and unnecessary requirements of management that restrict the productive work of academics, as depicted in Figure 5. The narrative of the university management is that we are digitally dominant, produce high impact research, service our communities well, are innovative in our teaching, work in an environment that is efficient, respectful and helpful and where creativity and innovation flourish (UNE, 2015), yet the reality for the academics in these examples is quite different. We felt our work was constantly interrupted, distrusted, disrespected and frustrated to fit with neoliberal management; experiences that were far from the ideals portrayed in the strategic plan. In turn, this meant that enjoyable and fulfilling work became onerous, tedious and seemingly pointless. It became more difficult to justify engaging in some of these activities, given the extra time they now required when we were juggling multiple projects and increasing work demands. So much extra time had to be dedicated to the projects than was necessary in order to comply with neoliberal management demands, accountability, compliance and proving the legitimacy of our efforts and skills. Creating 'hyperactive busyness' (Hil, 2012, p. 85) for academics means they are less able to stop and question poor policies, procedures and managerialism according to Smyth (2017). During the period of these events, management shifted the goal posts, continually adding additional layers of supervision, administration and processes that consume academics' time, so the real and important work could not be completed. This creates a gap between the two parties, with management moving further and further away from the reality that academics experience every day. This growing gap between university managers and the reality of workers 'is now a key feature of the university scene' (Connell, 2019a, p. 130). This has the consequence of shifting the emphasis of 'academic activity to commercial goals, the shift from exchange to competition, the movement from equality to inequality and the turning of academics into human capital' (Taberner, 2018, p. 130). In effect, what results is 'a kind of parallax – people in the same organisation begin to live in completely different worlds' (Spicer, 2018, p. 40). The consequences of this gap between management and workers can be significant, as discussed by Spicer (2018) in his analysis of the failure of Nokia. In relation to the higher education sector (Connell, 2019b) argues such a lack of synergy between academics and management poses risks to educational quality, and ultimately to the university's reputation as educational quality declines.

In moving towards increased managerialism (or what Blackmore, 2019a, calls proceduralism), which in our experience is demonstrated by the enforcement of policies and procedures that restrict individual academics from engaging in productive work, the role of universities is called into question. While the strategic plan under which we work promotes high quality outputs, the management of these plans has been heavily influenced by neoliberal values as shown in cumbersome requirements that did not enhance the quality of the work. In our accounts, it actively discouraged engagement in innovation and impact in research, meaningful service to the community and excellence in teaching. The existence of so many forms and procedures to prove the validity and worthiness of academic's work and the number of checks and approvals needed in all examples highlights neoliberal micromanagement, as explained by Giroux (2013; 2015).

Workers will feel mistrusted, undervalued and disillusioned when their work is scrutinised to such an extent, as was the case in the three accounts in this paper.

If you listen to the management speak, the university is presented as an organisation that creates research of high quality, is dominant in the digital domain and innovative in teaching and efficient and respectful of our practices; yet what academics experience is teaching impacted by processes that do not fit with teaching pedagogies and research time and energy are squeezed. This results in declining quality across all areas of academic work: teaching, research and service. These changes are underpinned by a rhetoric that positions higher education as a business; a business competing in an education market selling a product to students (Watts, 2017). Whilst there is debate as to the nature of the product being sold (Watts argues that education itself cannot be sold, so what students are purchasing is a qualification), the positioning of higher education as a business means that the original mission of higher education, [that of enhancing the capacity of students to engage effectively as democratic citizens, and to enhance social justice more broadly (Christensen *et al.*, 2019)], is compromised. In order to address this, Bell *et al.*, (2019, p. 11) argue we: 'must not just be teachers and scholars, we must be dissenters and transgressors in pursuit of racial justice, equity and transformative social change that allows for liberation and radical love to surface'.

For academics in universities, coping with their neoliberalised workplace is problematic. Many feel overwhelmed, overpowered, fearful and powerless to resist or change their workplace. High levels of stress, use of workplace counselling services, anxiety, depression, anger, sick leave, alcoholism, attrition and other signs of an unhappy workplaces abound

One of the issues with micromanagement is that academics feel they are not trusted to do their job (Connell, 2019a). Drawing particularly on the first and third narratives, seeking permission from several departments, along with attaining a new ethics clearance, and having work checked by a manager offers the covert message that academics cannot be trusted (a phenomenon widely discussed in the literature; Connell, 2019a; Kirkby & Reiger, 2015; Smyth, 2017). Specifically, from our examples we seem to be perceived by management as potentially doing something to jeopardise the university and the families our app was designed to support, engage in professional development as a way of escaping our work duties, or willing to approve the submission of student work that was sub-standard. Our shared experience leads us to believe academics are perceived by management as incompetent troublemakers, who need to be kept on a tight leash, micromanaged through forms and processes that do not make any sense to those working outside the management group. These processes are meant to support the work undertaken by the university staff, but they stifle academics and distract from their key research, teaching and service responsibilities. As Morrish (2016) argues, they appear to be developed for the sake of having processes, not for their utility. Spicer (2018, p. 55) concurs, arguing such processes are 'cooked up far from the day-to-day realities of a workplace. When they are implemented, there is a profound mismatch between working practices and grand ideas. New concepts, which are supposed to make things better, often make them worse'. Such managerial demands appear to have no demonstrable positive impact on quality but do serve to provide a paper trail for accountability purposes (Smyth, 2017). Ultimately, many academics avoid certain tasks because of the cumbersome forms or bureaucracy that cannot be separated from the task at hand, or choose to engage in fake compliance (Connell, 2019a), thus further widening the gap between the reality of working academics and management.

For academics in universities, coping with their neoliberalised workplace is problematic. Many feel overwhelmed, overpowered, fearful and powerless to resist or change their workplace. High levels of stress, use of workplace counselling services, anxiety, depression, anger, sick leave, alcoholism, attrition and other signs of an unhappy workplaces abound (Hil, 2012; Smyth, 2017). Even though they resist the neoliberal governmentality, they also tend to internalise the managerial rhetoric and start judging their performance in the light of the neoliberal mantra (Smyth, 2017) because they are immersed in it daily. According to Macías (2015), one of the important outcomes of neoliberalism in institutions is its role in 'producing subjects that, while suffering the detrimental effects of neoliberal deregulation, nevertheless internalise neoliberal discourses and use them to understand themselves and others as rational, calculative, enterprising, and individually responsibilised subjects' (p. 254). As Macías (2015, p. 267) explains, neoliberalism 'constitutes the university not only as a product of neoliberalism, but also as an instrumental site in which the biopolitical and ontological project of neoliberalism is accomplished'. Other causes for unhappiness of academics are the intensification of work and high-level changes such as restructuring (Macías, 2015). While these are often argued by management as necessary, and 'the result of crises, discourses of efficiency, streamlining and efficacy attach themselves to crisis discourses' they are often used by management to 'shape the neoliberal university' (Macías, 2015, p. 264).

Neoliberalism positions management as synonymous with efficiency (Watts, 2017); thus, better management is expected to 'prove an effective solvent for a wide range of economic and social ills' (Taberner, 2018, p. 132). Management or the leading of people is seen as a skill that can be taught (Taylor, 2003). As a neutral discipline, management is thought to be more efficient when managers have little knowledge of the sector, ensuring they operate independently, and without bias (Blackmore, 2019b). Unfortunately, research has so far failed to support this proposition (Spicer, 2018). Instead the neoliberal managerial context in which managers operate is likely to encourage the emergence of what Oplatka (2016) calls 'dark leadership traits'. As it is unusual for managers to be assessed for their skills or made accountable for the damage they potentially cause for the workers they supposedly lead or for the organisation, these dark traits tend to be overlooked. There are few avenues to address damage caused, but in our context, they include a cumbersome and time-consuming complaints system which the staff union may assist with and Public Interest Disclosure (PID) processes through an auditor. The difficulty of complaining in a workplace and the processes involved mean most instances go unreported. Instead, managers are often promoted on the basis of their dark leadership traits and continue to bully from a higher position with a commensurate salary, where their autocratic leadership style continues to impact negatively on employee performance (Basit *et al.*, 2017) and employee wellbeing (Beattie, 2019). Indeed Graeber (2019) suggests that the further a manager climbs the hierarchy, the less accountability is required so that by the time the level of vice chancellor is reached, Gschwandtner and McManus (2018) argue salary levels are not based on performance, but rather on a keeping-up-with-others approach.

Managers at lower levels operate as gatekeepers between workers and those further up the hierarchy. Often these managers are promoted from the ranks of workers. Because of their previous relationships, workers often expect these managers to advocate for them; as well as understand the realities of their daily work and support them. There is a greater sense of betrayal when these managers fail to do so (Barcan, 2019). Managers in this position experience tension between the expectations of workers and the expectations of their managers. Generally, those who demonstrate loyalty to the regime tend to be rewarded (West, 2016) so that for these managers there is significant motivation to clearly signal they belong to the leadership group (Davis, 2017; Spicer, 2018). In our examples, we see this in the verbal support offered that made absolutely no difference to the imposts placed on us by management outside of the school. In further examples, we have seen this in requirements imposed for study leave, annual leave and promotion to which the managers in question were not subject when they were working as academics.

Resistance to neoliberal managerialism in higher education comes with a cost. As West (2016, p. 6) explains:

> Dissenters are casually dismissed as poor team-players, trouble-makers or malcontents ... those academics who show their loyalty to the new paradigm can expect favourable treatment in the allocation of teaching responsibilities, travel grants, even office space and furnishings. Above all, they can be safely promoted to positions of managerial authority themselves – although they will then be more closely monitored for their conformity to accepted doctrine.

Policies, procedures and initiatives developed in isolation without an understanding of the reality of day-to-day work generally tend to be ineffective and time consuming but their failure to achieve desired outcomes tend to be blamed on workers themselves rather than on the managers who developed them (Spicer, 2018). As Brennan and Zipin (2019, p. 275) explain: 'slippages, missteps and unintended consequences blamed on "workplace culture that needs to change", rather than on managerial culture that needs to change'. The emotional impact of this on academics goes unnoticed or is seen as a weakness. Here, the 'pathologisation of those who complain is never far from the surface. Healthy individuals conform, oppositional individuals are maladjusted. A case of bullying or harassment is more conveniently conceived as the result of an "adjustment disorder"' (West, 2016, p. 8).

The culture of individualism that is an inherent part of neoliberalism (Beilharz, 2015) means that the solution to staff resistance is positioned as being in the hands of the staff themselves. Those who are concerned about overwork are directed to courses that will teach them how to prioritise their time; those who are targeted for bullying are sent to stress management courses and counselling, and anybody who is feeling the effects of the restructure is sent to a course on managing change. Management and inherently poor systems are never cited as the reason for entrenched issues. In our organisation, when staff feedback indicated poor communication channels between academics and management, the number of unidirectional management missives with a lack of real collaboration or feedback, the solution instigated was fourfold. Firstly, a Facebook at work page was introduced, secondly, multiple emails (up to four each time) were sent with the same content from different people, thirdly senior management sent out an email 'news' every week, and lastly, a restructure offering yet more management levels and additional new management positions was imposed. No strategies were developed to improve communication from workers to management. Instead, all the strategies focused on creating channels from management to workers.

In concluding this discussion, we identify a need for further research in these perilous neoliberal times for universities. As academics, we are generally good at looking outwards

for research topics, but in this challenging higher education climate, we need to look inwards more often. Specifically, we have identified three areas of potential research:

1. Examining critically reflective management approaches, drawn from arguments that management must be equally accountable, if not more so, than workers;
2. Investigating embedded inequities between management and staff created by increasingly hierarchical and burgeoning management structures; and,
3. Interrogating change frequency and 'the change is good' mantra, plus seeking robust rationales and frameworks for structural change.

Where to from here

In this paper we have used three examples from our recent experiences to reflect on the ways in which neoliberal managerialism has shaped our world and the ways in which we operate in that world. We believe that simply accepting that this is the way things are in higher education is not acceptable. As Davis, (2017, p. 40) claims: 'To allow wild propositions to stand unchallenged is to acquiesce to the transformation by which untruth becomes conventional wisdom'. By locating ourselves, as the 'sociological observer as part of the events being researched' (Fox & Alldred, 2017, p. 21), we open opportunities to think about things differently. We must no longer be complicit in our downfall, but actively resist in order to create change. Essentially, 'we need to stop deluding ourselves into believing that we need to continue endorsing stupid ideas' (Smyth, 2017, p. 214).

Resistance makes an individual vulnerable so it is important that we work within the collective. This means being clear about a common purpose underpinned by common values around cultural democracy and social justice.

Our reflections lead us to identify the importance of engaging in some form of resistance as advocated in the literature. Hil (2012, p. 202) reflects on the function of resistance that is 'to destabilise the existing order by engaging in various acts of dissidence and subversion'. These acts might be at the micro-level such as that defined by Taberner (2018) as covert resistance and by Bosanquet (2017) as STARS – slow, tiny acts of resistance. Such acts of resistance might involve forgetting to perform certain tasks, leaving tasks incomplete, and taking of sick leave when stress escalates. Whilst small acts of resistance might be perceived as a childish avoidance of the bigger problem, they have a positive purpose in serving to raise awareness of the absurdities and tensions experienced by those subjected to neoliberal managerialism. Raising awareness is a preliminary step that contributes to the creation of a communal culture (a shared understanding) which then leads to behavioural change, thus its import should not be overlooked.

Taylor (2003) argues we should refuse to participate in needless managerial activities while Kenway, Boden, and Fahey (2015) introduce the idea of symbolic acts of defiance such as academics avoiding school meetings or choosing to work from home more often. Often academic unions include such small acts in their industrial action, so workers are protected when they take these measures, which is important for many personnel. Certainly, we need to think critically about our work and the way we daily engage in the workplace (Thornton & Shannon, 2015). Language might be reframed (Hil, 2012) so that meaningless management-speak (what many authors now call bullshit: Ball, 2017; Frankfurt, 2005; Luks, 2017; Spicer, 2018) is challenged.

Informal strategies may include simply being available to talk with colleagues (Graeber, 2019) and demonstrating appreciation of their work (Morrish, 2019). We have a responsibility to reclaim time (Watts, 2017), a movement captured in the idea of the slow academic (Klein & Wall, 2019). Humour provides an opportunity to speak back to power (Manathunga & Bottrell, 2019). Foucault suggested speaking back to power helps shape our subjectivity in ways other than imposed upon us by managers (Raaper, 2019).

More overt resistance strategies might include what Spicer (2018, p. 168) calls administrative sabotage: 'using bullshit as a way of purposefully clogging up an administrative system … as a purposeful and planned way of overloading the administration of large organisations.' He also suggests advocating for strategies that 'tether people more closely to the longer-term results of their decisions' (p. 185) which may involve developing performance accountability measures for managers (Christensen *et al.*, 2019; Smyth, 2017).

Resistance makes an individual vulnerable (Hil, 2012; Spicer, 2018) so it is important that we work within the collective (Kenway *et al.*, 2015). This means being clear about a common purpose (Graeber, 2019) underpinned by common values around cultural democracy and social justice (Manathunga & Bottrell, 2019). Through the collective we are exposed to different views from those with different backgrounds (Ferrando, 2012), and those holding different theoretical perspectives (Manathunga & Bottrell, 2019), all of which are necessary to strengthen the collective. These provide us with ammunition to build spaces of hope (Kenway *et al.*, 2015); and alternative narratives that speak to our own truths and values. Together we can develop the radical imagination

claimed by Bourassa (2019) as essential for the development of alternatives to neoliberal managerialism. We hope this paper takes the first step in sharing our understandings, and in reaching out to others who may contribute to a collective building of alternative narratives. Organisational change is challenging, and open to opposition and setbacks and is hard work. Indeed, Martin Luther King (1963) stated 'We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through … tireless efforts and persistent work' (para. 21).

Overall, organisational narratives are important documents to critique, because it is from these that many of the directions and actions of an organisation are founded. This study highlighted that when the reality of the workplace and these organisational narratives are so incompatible it becomes comical, workers can experience high levels of frustration, disappointment, disillusionment and have their time wasted, which further hinders their work. Whilst neoliberal governmentality of managers reasons that it is the worker's job to take responsibility for problems (Macías, 2015; Moisander *et al.*, 2018; Pyysiäinen *et al.*, 2017) such as these, responsibility for the chasm between workers experiences and organisational ideals needs to be addressed. Macías (2015) argues that the governmentality framework of neoliberalism is 'an onto-epistemological project that consistently shapes social environments, social policies, state institutions, and the subject that is captured and lives within these environments, policies and institutions' (p. 253). The effects of this framework on the work and lives of staff within our organisations is profound and needs to be questioned. We believe that critiquing these narratives and the neoliberal practices of management within the organisation could raise awareness and open opportunities to improve the quality and quantity of the work and the quality of experiences of workers. As such, workers would be more likely to enjoy their work, engage in innovative research, service and teaching and meet the needs of the organisation and the academy to better fulfil their role within society. Morrish (2019) reinforces this by stating:

> Staff who feel valued and whose demonstrable competence is recognised by security of employment will experience less stress and are more likely to exhibit greater loyalty to their employers. A corollary of this transformation would be an improvement in relationships between managers and academics, a state which would favour enhanced learning for students' (pp. 10-11).

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