

“UNCOVERED IN THE GLASS CAGES” RETHINKING NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19: CRITICAL PERFORMATIVITY FOR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual article draws on social harm theory and critical management studies to critically examine the neoliberal governance of academics' performance management in higher education, particularly in the emerging “normal” of COVID-19. The article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a crisis that lays bare the deleterious global ramifications of the dominant political-economic ideology of neoliberalism in every aspect of societal life, more so in education. Moreover, the justifiably lauded shift to the digital space of teaching and learning is increasing the already problematic panoptic surveillance and is invading the hiding spaces within the glass cages.

The neoliberal approach to PM is inflicting social harms, unintentionally and intentionally. With the COVID-19 pandemic offering us the “regia” moment of opportunity to rethink and pragmatically insert critical alternatives to the neoliberal governance of universities' performance management practices, this article proposes a critical performativity approach to work towards incremental micro-emancipations.

Keywords: social harm, neoliberal governance, critical performativity, managerialism, micro-emancipation, performance management

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily put the world on hold for the sole purpose of protecting and saving people's lives. Never has it happened in this late capitalist contemporary society that humanity is placed above economic and political interests. The neoliberal capitalist agenda was in suspense, and a social democratic approach was at play, with governments side-tracking the “efficiency” budget-cutting to avail billions and trillions in some cases to lessen the effects of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic is primarily a health crisis; however, it has turned economic, political and social life upside down, making patent the decades-long inequality and

poverty harms inflicted by neoliberalism on most of the world's population. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the enduring contemporary capitalism's harmful shortcomings of economic and political crises, growing inequalities, poverty, racism, nationalism and terrorism. In the paused COVID-19 world, universities were not spared in the crisis. Lockdowns enforced closures, halting face-to-face learning facilitation, and universities had to be operationalised academically and administratively online through various platforms – Blackboard, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Hangouts Meet, DingTalk, Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, to add a few. In this shift, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated persistent systemic and structural inequalities and the related social harms perpetuated by the global and national neoliberal governance, which has grounded universities' reforms to align with the markets and international rankings. Youngsters in developed and developing countries experienced COVID-19 differently, with negative future implications for those in poorer developing countries that struggle with resource inadequacies.

Contemporary neoliberal universities are privileging the corporate orientation, adopting business management practices that legitimise their participation within the free-market terrain (Morrish and Sauntson 2016). Universities' faith in the free-market system and its related instrumentalist rationality is founded on the neoliberal efficiency and effectiveness assumptions of rapidly churning out better outputs (with fewer inputs) and "hopefully" enabling equitable and just distribution of resources (Davies 2016). However, South Africa's sanctioned trajectory of instrumental rationality has tipped the scales within the continuum in favour of the economic agenda, creating struggles, risking leaving many behind and undermining progressive efforts initiated by the transformation mandate (Seyama 2018). The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall students' protests attested to the unenviable neoliberal effects of increasing tuition fees and colonising curricular and academic spaces (Badat 2016).

Neoliberally driven universities implemented academic performance management (PM) to foster strategically aligned instrumentalist and quantifiable performances of research, teaching, and community engagement (Lorenz 2014). Continuing with the problematisation of neoliberal PM of academics in the African university context, which has been used as a surveillance and quantification tool, subjugating academics (Seyama 2017), I contend that the increased vital use of online academic activities as a response to COVID-19, have expanded the panopticon and other related subjugating effects. This "new normal" has implications of uncovering academics hiding within the glass cages – exposing academics using academic, physical spaces to insert anti-neoliberal thinking and practices. In this context, COVID-19 is likely to strengthen the neoliberal agenda's reach, which could produce social harms that are more devastating to academics' autonomy, the meaning of authentic educational work and

students' subjectivities. Given Le Grange's (2020, 1) concern that "the COVID-19 pandemic could accelerate the uberfication of the university", I argue that academics ought to reconsider their position as instruments of neoliberal education.

Thus, I advocate for rethinking academics' PM, as in its current use, it is one of the most powerful neoliberal governmentality technologies, which facilitates the dominant instrumental rationality in education. Within such rationality, work harms are inherent in how academics engage with their work, pertinently in how PM is serving to subjugate academics' subjectivities and agencies through panoptic practices and creating hostile and unsupportive conditions by promoting competition. Drawing upon the social harm theory and critical management studies (CMS), this article explores the perspectives that arise from Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman's (2009) conception of critical performativity. These provide a useful way of probing, deconstructing and rethinking the social harm of subjectification and individualisation emanating from the neoliberal performativity culture in organisations. From this perspective, critical performativity offers a way of inserting the necessary anti-neoliberal scholarly activism in "confronting the slouching beast [neoliberal education]" (Ball 2016, 1046).

To argue against neoliberal performativity in HE and offer a proposition for critical performativity, I start with the engagement of social harm theory to ground the problematisation of the current PM discourses and practices and the COVID-19 digital educational changes. Second, I then evaluate the current neoliberal influence on PM in universities. Third, I illuminate the excessive panoptic implications of COVID-19 and the lurking educational uberisation related to the shift to remote learning and teaching. Fourth, I offer an argument for the relevance of CMS in rethinking PM. Fifth, I outline critical performativity strategies and then evaluate their influence on the interrogation of the current PM practices in exploring possibilities for micro-emancipations that will reduce or eliminate PM social harms and keep the cover of academics hiding in the glass cages.

SOCIAL HARM THEORY: SITUATING CONTEMPORARY NEOLIBERALISM

The notion of social harm first emerged from critical criminology, which problematised conventional criminology's limitations to fully capture the "legal" harms that fall outside the criminal boundaries (Hillyard and Tombs 2007). In contemporary society, growing harms are primarily hidden, ignored, normalised or accepted as part of societal and organisational life. What is noted about these harms is that they are responsible for destructive outcomes; however, they are not punishable because they do not qualify as criminal acts (Hillyard and Tombs 2007). Therefore, positioned as an alternative to criminology, the social harm approach is revered for its emancipatory possibilities in revitalising the social sciences by providing realistic insights

into the contemporary society characterised by abuse of power and becoming more harmful to the human condition (Raymen 2019). The primary contention about criminology lies in its focus on harms generated by individuals and considered as such within criminal law definitions. In contrast, social harm considers how societal arrangements compromise human needs (Tombs 2018). Thus, harm occurs when societal or organisational power structures or individual deeds marginalise people, deterring them from realising their needs and individual self-determination. Such harms undermine their ability to flourish (Pemberton 2016), explore their inherent potential, and live fruitful and meaningful lives.

In the context of this study, social harm theory is explored as an approach that provides a unique lens for illuminating and interrogating the impact of neoliberalism in HE. Distinct from criminology, social harm holds society and organisations accountable for their role in intentionally creating an affirmed societal life. And should grant all people equal opportunities and resources to explore and achieve their self-actualisation needs as aligned to intellectual, artistic, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of life (Callinicos cited in Lassett 2010). Concerned with people's painful struggles in contemporary society, essentially, social harm encompasses violations of the powerful public and private entities (governments, corporations, and institutions), which are not criminalised yet causing considerable harm to communities and individuals (Pemberton 2016). Through regulations, policies, and practices, these power structures engender varying contemporary society's harms framed within the age, class, economic, gender, religious, racial and sexual dimensions (Hillyard and Tombs 2007). Pemberton (2016), in his research, further included autonomy and relational harms. He determined that particular social systems produce varying degrees of harm and effective harm reduction strategies. His studies determined that social democratic states produced less harm and had harm prevention policies than neoliberal capital states.

In response to why social harms are increasing, Pemberton (2016) places the blame squarely on neoliberalism, arguing that it has managed to re-organise society in ways that increased the harms of capitalism. Countries, corporations, and institutions undergirded by the neoliberal capitalist agenda inherently produce harms – intentionally or unintentionally (Hillyard and Tombs 2007). Raymen (2019) argues that the liberal-capitalist political economy's taken-for-granted assumptions and operations are fundamental in steering contemporary society into a disastrous future of obliterated individual economic and political freedoms. Drawing on the neoliberal ethos, governments reduce public spending, resulting in inadequate and poor health, education and housing provision (Raymen 2019). In taking a *laissez-faire* approach to corporate regulation, governments permit the removal of the necessary workplace protections, exposing employees to exploitation, such as long working hours, poor

remuneration, precarious contracts fostering job insecurity, emotional labour, and loss of autonomy (Lloyd 2018).

As noted earlier, in a contemporary neoliberal university, governments' demand for accountability has enforced managerialism or NPM (Lorenz 2014). In embracing neoliberalism, universities affirm the contemporary capitalist mode of production, increasing capitalism's social harms. Uppermost is the autonomy harm; thus, they abdicate their responsibility to protect academic freedom. Hence, I argue that the PM's neoliberal approach effects universities' social harms.

THE NEOLIBERAL PERFORMATIVE IMPACT OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

While in South Africa, HE transformation has been predicated on a redress agenda to facilitate a democratic and socially just system, globally, HEIs were years ahead of a new governance system through the NPM. NPM was brought on by neoliberal reforms initiated in the 1980s and at its heart are financial efficiency – reduced public spending and market-driven principles (Lorenz 2014). In this global context, South African HEIs also had to institute NPM to facilitate accountability mechanisms, which were enacted through audits and PM systems (Clare and Sivil 2014). As a political and economic ideology, neoliberalism orders societal life predominantly in economic terms, constituting individual worth in their actions insofar as they produce economic outputs (Clarke and Knights 2015). In the contemporary university, neoliberalism underpins performativity, which is pursued as a necessary and indisputable approach to achieving the common good (Clare and Sivil 2014). The problem is that neoliberalism is endorsed as an immutable norm that offers the only way that individuals and organisations can attain freedom and exercise their democratic values while deriving symbolic and material resources pertinent for a good quality of life (Harvey 2005). In this sense, it places the value of individuals' life outcomes on how they exercise their rights in making choices about their economic development. However, ultimately, neoliberalism limits people's autonomy to choose what is meaningfully aligned with their potential and life purpose. Yet, as a well-orchestrated responsabilisation strategy, neoliberalism shifts failure to the individual (Davies 2016). Consequently, the individual is accountable, disregarding the predetermined context, which is already biased against others.

In the neoliberal university, performativity flourishes. Performativity embodies discourses that construct reality wherein visible actions emerge in outputs or products (Fournier and Grey 2000). Such outputs would serve a particular purpose depending on a paradigm or ideology. Within the neoliberal ideology, performativity is knowledge production and its related activities

that serve economic efficiency by ensuring the highest yields with marginal outlays (Fournier and Grey 2000). It encompasses the power relationship between PM systems' aspects and academics' sense of self and expertise (Ball 2016). Thus, it drives academic productivity and constructions of entrepreneurial selves, and what matters in this performativity is continuous high outputs rather than the underpinning ethos of quality intellectual engagement (Ball 2016).

Within the South African HE, this neoliberal thinking pits academics' intellectual aspirations against social aspirations, resulting in fewer choices towards the commitment to resolve historical, political and social dilemmas. Neoliberal PM has produced capitalistic, entrepreneurial academic ethos where academic activities become calculated practices (Clarke and Knights 2015) that conceal the reality of the harmful effects of excessive quantification. Within this capitalist ethos, only savvy (however ethically suspect) individuals who can grasp moments of opportunity for career success benefit from the PM system. Ultimately, in the fight for limited resources (permanent posts, bonuses, promotions, and research grants), academics are enmeshed in capitalistic, competitive individualism (Cruickshank 2019). Lloyd (2018) contends this fosters harmful subjectivities that engage in positive motivation to harm – willingness to cause harm to others to secure their position. In accepting the notions of academic capitalists, academics ought to consider the “ethical void at the heart of capitalism” (Lloyd 2018, 162). South African students' protests on high tuition fees and HEIs' failure to decolonise academic spaces (Badat 2016) demonstrated that the current PM system had been a politically and socially deficit response. In essence, it undermines the struggle for democracy and social justice in South Africa.

Universities' invasively transparent and target-driven PM systems have been critiqued for their panoptic tendency, which has become a disciplinary power, making PM a robust controlling tool (Seyama 2017; Clare and Sivil 2014). Foucault (1979) drew from Bentham's panopticon metaphor, a circular watchtower used in prisons to guard prisoners. Conscious of the towering surveillance of the panopticon, prisoners self-regulated their behaviour to avoid discipline. In university settings, academics and their performances are constantly under the surveillance radar of their managers; subsequently, they police themselves and conform to neoliberal demands (Shore and Roberts 1995). In such conditions, academics' subjectivities are confined and captured (Seyama 2018), which has negative implications for their academic freedom, identity and the related professional and political ethos (Clarke and Knights 2015).

THE PANOPTICON OF COVID-19: UNCOVERING ACADEMICS HIDING IN THE GLASS CAGES

Couch, Robinson and Komesaroff (2020) observe that the justifiable extended surveillance

deployed to protect public health could be normalised and exploited politically by governments to entrench extreme social control beyond COVID-19. Concurring with this observation, I consider the taken-for-granted broadened use of digital remote teaching and learning and the accompanying advanced use of digital surveillance in the crisis management of COVID-19 by universities. I contend that shifting to remote teaching and learning and the related audit mechanisms to foster academics' accountability during lockdowns extended the reach of managerial panoptic surveillance and control. Within the universities' neoliberal performative culture, the academic PM is problematised as a panopticon – a surveillance tool creating prison-like conditions (Seyama 2017). Thus, we must be mindful of this extension of surveillance. In this vein, I argue that two problems emerge from this extended digital surveillance: first, the unwanted visibility effects managerial surveillance in “online classrooms”. Second, the possibility of self-deployed visibility and surveillance in “fear of exile” (Hafermalz 2020) in assuring management that academics as employees are working and being part of the family that continues to perform towards achieving institutional goals. From this perspective, digital work is becoming a strong disciplinary power, effecting deeper governmentality. The impact of either of these problems or responses depends on academics' subject positions.

In response to COVID-19, the previously advantaged universities quickly moved online and successfully facilitated remote teaching and learning, while the previously disadvantaged universities struggled (Le Grange 2020). Digitised remote teaching and learning has been lauded for saving the integrity of universities' academic year. Some universities managed to complete curricular and final year examinations. These universities created work-life online, with most administrative and academic activities continuing with minimal interruption. This meant that universities took the shape of “boundaryless” organisations (Hafermalz 2020), functioning fully outside the traditional physical space. Consequently, the digital working space has made academics' presence “boundaryless” and the physicality of the workspace is obliterated. Outside the university walls, academics had to assure their presence, engagement and performance outputs. With academics working online, universities are representative of “distributed new culture organisations” from which new problems of “necessary visibility” are emerging (Hafermalz 2020, 697). Thus, I contend that within the neoliberal context, this significant new development of online work-life is “unintentionally” extending the already overbearing panoptic surveillance associated with the performative culture.

With online teaching and learning, HODs, programme coordinators, and vice deans have access to online platforms, with real-time access to academics' activities and students' engagement and communication. They are literally in the classrooms with lecturers and students. This was implemented to ensure that academics adequately and appropriately engage

students online during the COVID-19 lockdowns (and continuing). In this sense, academics were being policed, and this “necessary visibility” is becoming a powerful disciplinary tool. From personal experience and observations, there have been instances where academics were reprimanded for inappropriate responses to students’ requests or have been “advised” by academic managers about some aspects of their communication with students. In some ways, such access and “advice” serve an auditing role, which is more intrusive than the traditional quality assurance measures. Thus, academics must be more vigilant in this space and sharpen their self-monitoring skills and tactics. However, the critical question remains: “How will they protect themselves from the governmentalised subjectivities?”

Therefore, the idea of private classroom spaces where academics conducted their teaching responsibilities has been lost. This is a loss for academics who have begun to “hide within the glass cages” to escape the glare of managerial control and take up anti-neoliberal approaches (Seyama 2020). In this context, the metaphor of the glass cages represents the transparent performative academic space where academics are expected to demonstrate their instrumental performance outputs. Seyama (2020) highlighted academics’ struggles with surveillance as encapsulated within the instrumental PM contract and related practices, impinging on their ways of being, doing, thinking, teaching, and researching. Some academics have devised means and practices to “hide within the glass cages” (Seyama 2020), thus subverting surveillance and instrumental performatives. They used academic, physical spaces of lecture rooms, stairs and offices as ... “spaces outside the reach of management’s control. They are using academic spaces to break through the cracks and openings and repurposing them to defy managerialist approaches to education” (Seyama 2020, 1). In these spaces, academics raise students’ critical consciousness about neoliberalism’s promotion of economic outputs at the expense of social justice imperatives, increasing inequality and undermining people’s ability to flourish.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given momentum to digital technologies for learning, teaching, and work in general. Consequently, digital technologies have gained credence in the South African educational context, increasing the need for their use and the related neoliberal practices, risking the “uberification of education”. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2017, 258) describe the “uberisation” of education as “... the field, whereby increased access, rapid delivery, hybridisation, open competition, outsourcing and consumer scrutiny have rapidly become markers for how we ought to engage in creating and sustaining quality approaches to business, including the ‘business’ of education”. With the emerging deeper panopticism during and beyond COVID-19, we are already observing traces of uberisation with troubling implications for academics’ autonomy, psychological safety and identity constructions. Continuous visibility is expected; working from home assumes 24/7 availability, and real-time or instantaneous

response is expected by management and students. Collins, Glover and Myers (2020) also observed that academics are continuously looking for students, line managers, and colleagues' emails, WhatsApp, and posts on student support forums. Under pressure to show up if one is perceived not to be working or missing activities, academics risk obsession with "FOMO", the fear of missing out or the fear of exile (Hafermalz 2020). In this sense, academics have to make themselves visible within the panopticon and reveal themselves in the glass cages. However, the accompanying anxiety and related exhaustion make it reluctant voluntary visibility because of the fear of exile (Hafermalz 2020).

Outside the physical space of offices, people must continue as a departmental unit digitally because the threat of exile as a fear of being overlooked, forgotten, or left out, creates the fear of disappearing from the performative space. What is more concerning is that non-visibility creates the perception of non-performance; thus, academics risk losing the title of being academic performers. Hafermalz's (2020) perspective challenges the dominant panopticon's analysis of involuntary imprisonment, which always assumes that visibility is enforced and unwanted by those under surveillance. In the contemporary distributed and boundaryless organisations, where work insecurity is prevalent, employees desire visibility – voluntary imprisonment.

The implication of the "just in time" uberised education is that the focus is on satisfying the paying, highly demanding, and entitled customer. The problem in education is that the customer does not just pay and get quality service. The customer is a student who should be responsible for doing difficult academic work. However, the dominant neoliberal governance apparently fosters the student customer's wishes to take the ride and sit comfortably, receiving the service without effort. This emerging culture threatens the erosion of academic ethos, which will be detrimental to developing future generations of critically conscious thinkers and innovators. Thus, I contend that considering CMS' critical performativity as an anti-neoliberal strategy could promote a critical engagement with the extended digital remote teaching and learning and the related PM expectations.

CRITICAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES IN RETHINKING PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Critical management studies (CMS) provide a different lens through which mainstream managerial assumptions can be examined to expose the nuanced realities of daily organisational work encounters. It gives resources to question the extent to which managerial research pursues projects that predominantly aim to improve performance, increase productivity and reduce costs (Butler and Spoelstra 2014). Critical management scholars contend that mainstream

management studies fail to acknowledge how political and power dynamics in work environments negatively influence human relations (Fleming and Banerjee 2015). CMS, therefore, seeks to show that unquestioned and lauded managerialist discourses legitimise untenable work relations among managers and employees (Fournier and Grey 2000) by reproducing hegemonic social inequalities. CMS's principal objective is to confront assumptions that the pursuit of profitability is inherently good and exposes managerial discourses that are oppressive, divisive and marginalising (Fleming and Banerjee 2015).

This article considers two influential positions on CMS. The first position is Fournier and Grey's (2000), who put forth the purist perspective of CMS, which centres on the conceptualisation of the three driving principles of CMS: anti-performativity, denaturalisation and reflexivity. The other position is that of Spicer et al. (2009), in which the critical performativity perspective of CMS is advocated. This position is termed the non-purist perspective of CMS. The principle of anti-performativity proposes rejecting any performances that pursue neoliberal efficiency. It is founded on the critique of the principle of performativity, which underpins mainstream management studies and "serves to subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency" (Fournier and Grey 2000, 17). It is positioned mainly on Lyotard's (1984) notion of performativity that Fournier and Grey (2000) problematise as an unending capitalistic pursuit of higher performance to gain more profits with fewer inputs.

Through de-naturalisation, CMS involves "deconstructing the 'reality' of organisational life or 'truthfulness' of organisational knowledge by exposing its 'un-naturalness' or irrationality" (Fournier and Grey 2000, 18). Thus, it confronts managerial discourses' taken-for-granted positivistic conjectures and opens possibilities for alternative practices (Butler and Spoelstra 2014). With the principle of reflexivity, researchers interrogate "their epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions far more than their non-critical (especially positivist) counterparts ..." (Butler and Spoelstra 2014, 540). Spicer et al. (2009) concede that a critical performative stance would mean a turnabout on how CMS envisions its outcomes – as those that directly undermine neoliberal performative outcomes, revealing emancipatory practices. To accomplish this, they suggest using the tactics of Affirmation, Care, Pragmatism, Presenting Potentialities and a Normative Orientation.

CRITICAL PERFORMATIVITY: ANTI-NEOLIBERAL POSITIONALITY

Given HE PM's limited effects on decolonising curricular and academic spaces and subjugation of academics, particularly with COVID-19's digital surveillance (and its future implications), a reconsideration of neoliberal performativity is necessary. Critical performativity, as a moderate stance of CMS, recognises the potential of turning mainstream managerial texts

towards emancipatory practices while getting buy-in from its detractors (Fleming and Banerjee 2015). In response to repositioning CMS's radical approach, Spicer et al.'s (2009) proposed critical performativity as a pragmatic alternative to neoliberal performativity. Critical performativity could be a more subtle approach that offers achievable micro-emancipations within current organisational practices (Fleming and Banerjee 2015). Hence, critical performativity is a promising perspective to navigate the paradoxes of PM in HE, particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic that is strengthening the panoptic hold of PM.

POSSIBILITIES FOR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION WITHIN CRITICAL PERFORMATIVITY

This section clarifies critical performativity strategies of Affirmation, Care, Pragmatism, Presenting Potentialities and a Normative Orientation. It explores how they might be useful in revealing possible positive and emancipatory performatives within the current neoliberal PM. Critical performativity is proposed as a probing tool to engage HODs and academics in questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions of a neoliberal performativity stance that produces loss of autonomy and relational social harms. And to possibly reveal and conceptualise practices that could lead to broader sustainable educational outcomes while protecting academics against the possible adverse effects of the uberisation of education.

The affirmative stance relates to critical management researchers paying closer attention to problematic practices for possible reconsideration within CMS ethos (Fleming and Banerjee 2015). Being close to the action, researchers can be in intimate institutional spaces where they have the opportunity to understand HE managers' limiting conditions, correctly identify change imperatives and together explore pragmatically worthy solutions. Affirmation requires researchers to listen attentively with empathy, thereby building trust and a necessity for openness towards researchers' critical inquiry of participants' perspectives about organisational practices (Spicer et al. 2009). Thus, it can open communication channels, facilitating democratic deliberations among researchers, HE managers and academics.

Taking an affirmative stance when interrogating PM in HE could offer participants and researchers space to share the challenges and meanings of their experiences. As a reflexive space, it becomes a safe space for academics to question their assumptions of neoliberal PM in universities. To this extent, sharing experiences could confirm that other academics are also confronted with the same PM contradictions, disappointments, and humiliations. As PM experiences leave academics and HODs feeling vulnerable, with a loss of confidence (Alvesson and Spicer 2016), the sense of solidarity could unburden feelings of shame (King and Learmonth 2015). Further, an affirmative stance could reveal a better understanding of

academics' conformity even with growing criticism of neoliberal PM (Butler and Spoelstra 2014). In collaboration, they can also devise coping mechanisms that can assist academics in surviving or escaping the control regimes.

The *ethic of care* relates to hearing the voices of those experiencing the phenomenon while gently interrogating those (Spicer et al. 2009). It proposes that researchers enable managers to air their views and deliberate on progressive outcomes (Fleming and Banerjee 2015). The ethic of care advocates for a positive and empathetic approach to examining managers' role in effecting undesirable and inhumane employee relations. Some academics and HODs' daily organisational experiences are painful (Seyama 2017); hence, care is crucial when interrogating PM practices to help them voice this suffering. Cabantous et al.'s (2015) empirical evidence highlights the problem of fragmented managers whose identity in organisations primarily comprises managerial discourses and practices that prioritise capitalistic goals. Thus, organisational managers do not have as much power as is commonly implied within mainstream management studies as their choices and judgments are directed by authoritative conditions that disregard their moral agency (Cabantous et al. 2015).

The affirmative stance and ethic of care tactics could facilitate a critical pedagogy of PM in academic spaces, which could change the narratives of those attempting to delegitimise PM's criticisms. Critical performativity becomes a reflexive tool used in the research process, canvassing more oppositional voices. This can work towards the emergence of a collective voice that could be productive in influencing senior management to consider alternative practices. On this view of affirmation and care, Wickert and Schaefer's (2015) proposition for progressive performativity suggests that micro-engagement strategies enable critical researchers to identify and support managers who are already internal activists. These managers are already opening emancipatory spaces for their colleagues toward collective power.

A *pragmatic orientation* proposes a critical, practical and sensible approach contextually sensitive to prevailing discourses (Spicer et al. 2009). It points to being reasonably practical with attaining performance targets in a limiting environment (Fleming and Banerjee 2015). Where there are perceptions of what is realistic, the tone is set for participants' openness and flexibility to listen and attempt an understanding of different positions. They can gather the courage to step up to change oppressive work conditions.

A pragmatic orientation also involves HODs and academics embracing practical paradoxes related to PM. Clarke and Knights (2015, 1880) note that "in effect, these [academics] have chosen neither absolute compliance nor total escape from the norms, rules and regulations", thereby accepting to live with the contradictions. In enabling HODs and academics to rethink PM practices, they could embrace different values of PM. Moreover, take

this as an opportunity to author performatives that address “... the broader values and functions of higher education (and not simply economic utility), which require deeper, more nuanced and more reflective mechanisms of performance evaluation” (Morrissey 2015, 625).

Attending to potentialities encompasses opening ways of thinking and exploiting hidden opportunities in an organisation (Spicer et al. 2009). For instance, by seeking non-hegemonic spaces, academics consciously or unconsciously create a free, peaceful, and creative atmosphere. In this way, they could “... create a sense of what could be” (Fleming and Banerjee 2015, 5). Attending to potentialities entails adopting alternative assumptions that reveal other ways of being and doing that are grounded on a different paradigm and actions, where, instead of seeing organisational life as akin to prison life that is volatile and soul-destroying (Seyama 2017), to seeing possibilities of universities’ organisational life that is uplifting, affirming and inspiring a broader societal mandate.

Researchers might ask: “How might it be in organisations when critical scholars are content?” Alternatively, ask Morrissey’s (2015, 628) question: “Are there ways in which we as academics can begin to author the very culture, the very mechanisms of measurement that might reflect values other than economic output values?” In this sense, researchers could read into HODs and academics’ accounts about how they escape the controlling governmentality of PM. For instance, Clarke and Knights’ (2015, 1881) participant academics “reported ways to seek out a more embodied engagement with their work”. These encompassed enriching students’ experiences by engaging with them as learners (not customers) who should be treated with love, care and compassion, and reflexively conscientised. Researchers could look into academics who choose to spend more time on academic activities, for example, extended teaching and community engagement. Researchers could also ask: “Are there academics and HODs who refuse what they have become as entrepreneurial projects to becoming ethical projects that speak truth to power and engage in activism?” (Clarke and Knight 2015).

A *normative orientation* relates to principles for normalised meaningful, and emancipatory organisational engagements (Fleming and Banerjee 2015). Spicer et al. (2009) suggest that the progressive achievement of micro-emancipations could be normalised as worthy. Central to a normative orientation is the interrogation and determination of how academics reclaim their freedom in academic spaces. It asks participants: “How do you embed progressive performances in the constraining environment?” These can be planned or unplanned emancipatory acts embedded in people’s daily activities (Spicer et al. 2009).

Using the tactics highlighted above to interrogate PM practices, critical performativity can enable researchers to examine nuanced HODs and academics’ behaviours that deviate from the managerialist logic yet with the potential to influence institutional change. These could offer

counter-narratives that relate breakthroughs and successes achieved outside the prescriptive PM.

With these tactics, critical researchers could recognise what empowers and disempowers HODs and academics in HE settings. They also understand participants' perspectives of reasonable and practical ideas shared by researchers. The open, collaborative and flexible approach that critical performativity eschews becomes managers' soundboard or critical tool for their perspectives on good organisational practices. Thus, the intention of exploiting and expressing the possibility for academics to micro-emancipate is to provoke the denaturalisation of managerialism, unveiling its suppositions and strategies and exposing presenting conditions that constitute non-repressive relations. Hopefully, this could instigate a change that re-embraces education as more than the production of knowledge for efficiency and profit maximisation, bringing the prospect of education as an essential social good that still puts human rights at the centre of humanity.

CONCLUSION

I began this article by arguing that PM in South African HE is driven by the NPM's cost-efficiency agenda, which reduces academic performance to a one-dimensional economic approach and consequently impedes the realisation of an authentic social justice transformation. The logic of efficiency means that academic managers' legitimacy depends on their ability to achieve higher performance targets with lesser costs and a panoptically policed PM. However, the cost cuts are never-ending, and as such, academics are complying with PM demands amidst the risk of long-term poor quality and unreflexive teaching, learning and research. This observation is more troubling during COVID-19, where digitised teaching and learning are increasing panopticism and accelerating the uberisation of education. It appears that the surveillance of COVID-19 is uncovering academics hiding within the glass cages; the invisibility and related freedoms and joys are ending. This has implications for loss of privacy within the glass cages of the lecture rooms, offices, and stairs that academics used to insert disciplinary, societal, institutional and governmental critiques.

Without question, the battle for academic souls is becoming more complex. Unless there is a continuous critical confrontation of neoliberalism's social harm effects, academics will remain troubled by what is becoming meaningless yet supposedly excellent performances producing high numbers of uberised graduates with limited capabilities for becoming authentic generational critical thinkers or shape-shifters. Academics will also remain complicit in the annihilation of academic ethos

By changing PM's critique from a contestation position to collaboration, critical

performativity can re-establish trusting, healthy relationships that build strong foundations that can withstand wicked problems and craft spaces for alternative assumptions. It influences how critical scholars construct questions that could reveal academics' positive performative PM accounts, embedding a humanistic approach to researching PM, mainly as managers practise or implement it. Given the relative infancy of critical performativity, it would be worthwhile for researchers to use this approach to evaluate the veracity of the arguments in this article.

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