Research is...making the emotional dimensions of academics' research visible

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Abstract

Research is at the core of universities' *raison d'être* and is an integral aspect of academic work, yet the ever-changing parameters around research are problematic. While studies have examined changes brought about through research assessment exercises and issues of academic identity in the twenty-first century, fewer studies have used arts-related research methods to engage with academics' experiences of these changes. This article draws upon visual and textual material generated by academics at an Australian university to investigate how academic researchers engage with research in the current milieu. This research offers an aesthetic mode of interruption and resistance to consider the emotional labour, work and energy involved in doing research that cannot be captured through neoliberal research measurement discourses. It deploys a post-Foucauldian governmentality theoretical framework to illustrate the ways in which academics [re]position multiple selves constantly to build more robust and critical responses to higher education reform.

Keywords Academic identities · Research · Impact and engagement · Arts-related research · Emotion work · Resistance

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Introduction

Engaging in research is an inherent aspect of an academic's work role (Emerald and Carpenter 2015; Forsyth 2014). Publications and outputs from research, while potentially yielding a public good, also provide cultural capital in shaping an academic's professional identity and status within and beyond the academy. Academics' reputations are built from their scholarly work whereby they become known and respected in their discipline.

Through the normalisation of neoliberal strategies of marketisation and managerialism, Blackmore (2014) argues, universities now operate within a "globalised context of edu-capitalism" (p. 550), and what comes to count as research is the production of consumable knowledge for transnational corporations or commercial product (Peters 2014). With higher education's gradual move to marketisation (Brown 2015), academic work has become commodified and seen as a product of "hypercapitalism" (Cribb and Gewirtz 2013, p. 345). Research has been reformulated as the generation of marketable, useful information for the knowledge economy, with the shift to evidence-based policy and research accountabilities "disciplining and containing: a politics of sameness rather than difference in respect of educational research" (Lingard and Gale 2010, p. 42). Using poetic transcription, Elizabeth and Grant (2013) seek to "represent the simultaneously intellectual, emotional and embodied dimensions of what it means to be an academic researcher in managerial times" (p. 124). They argue that managerialist modifications to universities have changed "the spirit of research", resulting in significant changes to what it means to be an academic (Elizabeth and Grant 2013, p. 123).

The data we draw on in this article emerged from a larger project where we worked with academic colleagues to explore their understandings about the various facets of academic work during a time of major restructuring and uncertainty at the university. We focus on the research facet of academic work in this paper along with the opportunities that arts-related research¹ offers to investigate ways in which changes to the spirit of research is impacting upon academics' identities.² We situate the arts-related methods we adopted within a post-Foucauldian governmentality theoretical framework, which connects the macro-level state-directed policies governing the management, audit and measuring of academic work with the micro-level impact upon academic identities or subjectivities (McKee 2009).

Building upon Foucault and key theorists developing subsequent governmentality studies (for example Rose 1999), we explore the "strategies, techniques, programs and rationalities" (Baumgarten and Ullrich 2012, p. 9) governing research

¹ Arts-related research "is research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, and represent human action and experience" (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2014, p. 1). Arts-related research has emerged from the interaction between social science and the arts and has concerns for inequalities and social justice. As a research method, it also encompasses both Arts-Based Education Research (ABER) and Arts-Informed Approaches (AIA).

² Elsewhere, Sadler et al. (2017) focussed on the teaching aspect of academic work and Renwick et al. (2020) concentrated on the community engagement (service) aspects of academics' work emerging from the larger research project of which this study is part.

in neoliberal universities and argue that neoliberal rationalities have transformed relationships in universities into transactions that obscure the realm of emotions in academic research. We justify our attempt to research *with* emotion (Prosser 2015) and situate our study within the literature on academic identities and subjectivities and arts-related methods.

Our purposes in this article are threefold: first, to report on an aspect of research undertaken at an Australian university as part of a project that explored the work that academics are expected to undertake; second, to interpret academics' bodily, emotional and intellectual responses to the changes in the spirit of research and the ways this shift impacts upon academics' subjectivities through the use of post-Foucauldian governmentality analysis; and third, to discuss the efficacy of using arts-related methods to research *with* emotion (Prosser 2015).

The conduct of conduct in neoliberal research

"The conduct of conduct" (Foucault 1978, p. 9) under current neoliberal regimes in universities has transformed research into the performative production of marketable, commodified information for the knowledge economy. Managerial regulatory practices in research are "a product of the intersection of neoliberal political rationalities and business management prescriptions for organisational change to meet the competitive challenge of a global economy" (MacKinnon 2000, p. 298). The regulatory strategies of auditing and targeting allocate or target research funding on the basis of performance in research audits via a "technology of mistrust" (MacKinnon 2000, p. 299). This enacts the unfounded but powerful suspicion among government bureaucrats and industry sectors that academics cannot be trusted and that universities are wasting tax-payers' money (Reid 2013). Power (1997) argues that audits focus on "the control of control" (p. 154) in internal university management systems, which gather "big data" and enact the "metric mania" (Lather and St Pierre 2013, p. 629) that drives research assessment exercises around the globe.

These performative neoliberal techniques of audit have a profound effect upon the potential subject positions available to researchers. An important aspect of post-Foucauldian understandings of governmentality is the ways in which these rationalities of power "shaped, directed and regulated individuals' beliefs, desires, lifestyles and actions" (Bevir 2011, p. 461). Post-Foucauldian governmentality analysis demonstrates how neoliberal subjects are constructed as "managers of their market performance or...enterprising selves" (Baumgarten and Ullrich 2012, p. 12), who must discipline themselves and their research in accordance with what can be counted as auditable outputs for the knowledge economy. Mills (2018) emphasises how the "audit cultures" evident in higher education increasingly shape "our everyday work, as everything is increasingly measured and counted (or in some cases not counted)", and as a consequence these audit cultures have had a profound impact upon academics' research experiences and "how we come to see ourselves as researchers" (Mills 2018, p. 578).

Our key focus in this article is to apply the other, particularly generative part of post-Foucauldian understandings of governmentality to our arts-related inquiry:

that is, the possibility for “counter-conduct”, where there is the potential to adapt or contest dominant subjectivities and to engage in forms of resistance to the practices of governmentality (Baumgarten and Ullrich 2012, p. 14). As a result, in post-Foucauldian understandings of governmentality, “power is not the antithesis of freedom and human agency, it presupposes it” (McKee 2009, p. 471). As Dean (1999) suggests, these post-Foucauldian readings of power “[enhance] human capacity for the reflective practice of liberty and acts of self-determination” (p. 38). Baumgarten and Ullrich (2012) also illustrate how protest against dominant subjectivities may also take the form of “individualised artistic critique” (p. 14) because the precarity of life and work under neoliberalism renders more overt, dramatic forms of resistance too dangerous. In this article, we apply post-Foucauldian governmentality analysis to academics’ visual and textual representations of their researcher subjectivities to trace their engagement in creative resistance to how they are being positioned in neoliberal universities.

The realms of emotion, affect and identity

We blend post-Foucauldian understandings of governmentality with an argument about the need to attend to the emotional realm of academic researchers’ subjectivities. The essentialising of measurable outputs as indicators of high performance and productivity for academics has redefined human relationships within the university sector as becoming transactional in nature (Lynch 2015). This ‘trading’ conception of research (Brew 2001), where the focus is on research products, reinforces dated European Enlightenment discourses that position research and knowledge as abstract, cognitive, universal and timeless (Connell 2007), and thereby renders “emotion, humour, poetry, song, a passion for a life of the intellect unthinkable” (Davies 2005, p. 7). It is also counter to a belief that, in the current climate, “the emotional dimension is crucial” (Connell 2019, p. 16).

While emotions are often at the core of some academics’ desire to work towards the public good and the survival of cultural democracy and social justice through their research, “denial of certain emotions is a form of boundary maintenance work to control workers because it depicts emotion as irrational, subjective and an individual pathology” (Blackmore 1996, p. 338). Smith and Ulus (2019) argue we need to stop these trends and spotlight the “emotional struggles and new wounds created by cruelly competitive, winner-takes-all structures” (p. 1). Blackmore (2014) also expresses scepticism about the therapeutic turn where “emotions have become the focus of management because they are the last resource left for managers to increase productivity” (p. 503).

Emerald and Carpenter (2015) argue that there is increasing interest in the impact of research on the researcher (Bloor et al. 2007; Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). This interest has been considered through concepts that stem from Hochschild’s (1983) notions of *Emotion work* that involves managing our private lives and context to navigate the socially constructed ‘feeling rules’—rules that reflect social guidelines of how people should feel in specific situations (Hochschild 1979)—and *Emotional labour*, where our emotions become a commodity

in a workplace or in the public realm, and where we are compelled to manage them appropriately for some economic exchange. The term ‘cathexis’—has been introduced to describe both a dynamic process and intense state of concentration or investment of mental or emotional energy on one particular person, idea, or object (Connell 1987; Erwin 2002; Hoffer 2005)—which also affords a way to frame the emotional dimensions that academics invest in their research work.

With the growing interest about emotion in the field of education, various theoretical and disciplinary perspectives have surfaced, within which there can be different foci about emotions, with an emphasis on the individual, the social dimensions of emotion and/or the role of politics and power-play in framing how emotions are constituted (Schutz and Zembylas 2016). Prosser (2015) makes a distinction between research *on* emotion which focusses on emotion as a topic where researchers generate new knowledge from data on emotion collected from participants who are relatively passive, as opposed to research *with* emotion that embodies different ways of knowing through less conventional methodological approaches. Research *with* emotion involves “[embedding] the researcher into the research in such a way that their emotional responses are part of the meaning-making process” (Prosser 2015, p. 175). Our emphasis in this article is on research *with* emotion, which means that we are seeing the social world of our colleagues through their emotions (Prosser 2015). We are not conducting research *on* emotion, yet emotion is key to our inquiry.

Along with discussion of emotion, the concept of ‘affect’ has also become prominent in education research. Understandings of affect can take on different meanings, depending on the theoretical perspectives being espoused when using the term (Siegworth and Gregg 2010). Hickey-Moody (2013) explains that “as a science of the emotions, affect theory unpacks the ways in which material changes create possibilities for feeling differently” (p. 127). Prosser (2015) sees emotion as an irrational, semiconscious “social construct, that is experienced and shared amongst humans [whereas affect is] nonconscious, elusive and intense feeling that is continually interacting between human beings” (p. 176). In these ways, Prosser concurs with others such as Massumi (2002) that emotion is a subjective recognisable sub-section of affect, which is how we are viewing emotion in this article.

We also draw upon recent research that has explored the impact of neoliberal governmentalities on academic identities or subjectivities. Pick et al. (2017) have classified academic identities research into three waves of analysis, from the first wave within which academic identity was considered as an issue worthy of identity, to the second wave wherein academic identity was considered a social construction. In the third wave, which “focusses on individuals and how they can build more robust responses to higher education reform” (Pick et al. 2017, p. 1177), is where we are positioning our arts-related study. Our paper seeks to make a contribution to the literature on academic identities, which has been dominated by interview-based studies, surveys and multivariate analyses and documentary analyses (Tight 2012). We argue that arts-related methods allow us to have different kinds of conversations about academic identity that shift us from cognitive, head spaces and a reliance on text and written sources of data to the heart space of images, the visual, the body and emotions (Prosser 2008).

The use of creative and arts-related approaches to explore academic identities is beginning to emerge within the third wave of research (Gray et al. 2018; Pick et al. 2017). Trowler (2013) made an early call for the application of art and design research strategies to be adapted for higher education research, arguing that art and design research is often “less restricted and more personal” (p. 58) by drawing upon multiple methods where “unpredictability, playfulness and organic development... [and] uninhibited activity” are central (Trowler 2013, p. 59). Creative research enables “the presence of ambiguity...the promotion of empathy ...[and] the presence of the aesthetic form” and generates new insights that go beyond language, producing multiple readings by diverse public audiences (Trowler 2013, p. 60).

Creative research, including creative and humorous reflexivity (Anderson 2008), has the capacity to become forms of resistance (Gray et al. 2018). As Shahjahan (2014) claims, by writing personal stories such as poetry, the embodied struggles with the colonising narrative of neoliberalism in higher education can be highlighted and undermined. Similarly, the symbolic representations generated through AIA can contribute to “resistance as transformation” by restoring aspects such as human dignity and human connection, which are lost in a culture of managerial performativity (Shahjahan 2014, p. 229). Highlighting and speaking back to the ‘slippery’ nature of sexism that shapes the experiences of women in academia by employing feminist performative arts-based interventions (Gray et al. 2018) is a further example of organisational resistance in higher education.

While other authors have highlighted the emotional dimensions of research (Neumann 2009), the commitment many researchers have to the public good (Åkerlind 2008) or exploring academic identities (Burford 2016; Pick, Symons and Teo 2017; Quinlan 2018) features the use of written sources. In the instance of Elizabeth and Grant (2013), “poetic transcriptions” were used to capture the effects of managerial changes to understandings of research by provoking “a different kind of relationship between empirical data and reader” (p. 122).

Examples also exist of research in which text and visual data were utilised, such as King and Billot’s (2016) work to explore the [re]formation of academic identities. They argued metaphors are powerful, not only for their linguistic production of analogies, but also for the ways they reveal both conscious and unconscious conceptualisations and emotions. We argue that visual arts-related methods provide additional vivid, powerful illustrations of the level and intensity of emotions academics experience under the pressure of research assessment and auditing practices that diminish the very spaces of creativity and originality required to produce high-quality research that delivers benefits to society. We suggest visual arts-related methods offer an aesthetic mode of interruption and resistance to contemporary dominant and constraining audit approaches to research.

Research design: utilising arts-related approaches

We draw here on data from a larger project that focussed on what it meant to be an academic in the current higher education climate, which was conducted with academic colleagues at an Australian university. The project arose in response to the

university undergoing substantial restructuring and where institutional performance indicators and understandings of academic work—teaching, research and community engagement (or service)—appeared to be changing, with noticeable impacts on our colleagues' sense of well-being. The research was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is an important 'date stamp' because of the additional impacts caused by the pandemic. Within the research, we sought to explore two research questions:

1. What do the espoused core principles of work in universities (i.e. teaching, research and community engagement (service)) mean for individual academics engaged in these endeavours?
2. How effective are arts-informed and participatory approaches in opening up new possibilities for academics to collaborate and consider complex notions of identity and collegiality?

In this paper, we particularly focus on the first research question as we have written in detail elsewhere about our findings about the participatory dimension to our arts-informed methods (Manathunga et al. 2017; Sadler et al. 2017).

Once approval was received from the university's Human Ethics Committee (Ethics Number HRE14-194), all academics in the faculty were invited via email to participate in the project. Twenty-two academics, or approximately one-quarter of the faculty's teaching and research academics, participated in the research over a 15-week period. Participants were invited to email an image or images and a short text of fewer than 30 words in the style of a traditional postcard in response to separate prompts: 'Teaching is...', 'Research is...' and 'Community engagement is...'. These initial three prompts were sent separately to participants at intervals of three to four weeks.

The postcard format was chosen as a novel and efficient option in order to generate a "juxtaposition of words and images" that might produce new meanings (Leavy 2015, p. 235). The format has a long tradition in arts-related approaches as it provides ways to engage hard to access participants differently through a 'cultural probe' and encourages knowledge exchange that blurs the boundaries of those involved in the project (Byrne et al. 2018; Goopy and Kassan 2019). Participants were required to seek written consent from any people present in photographs they took and, for publication, we ensured that online sources used for any images were from public picture image banks that allowed unrestricted or attributed use (Butler-Kisber 2010). The images featured in this article represent a combination of found images, participants' own photographs and a blend of these.

Analysis

Each postcard was considered separately, initially with a description of each image as suggested by Barrett (2003) in his work on interpreting art, before then summarising the main points that were made in the accompanying text; we were intent on

Table 1 Analysis protocol incorporating the use of sentence stems

“In this image... [followed by a description of the objects, locations etc. in the image]”;
“For us...[a statement about what meaning we were constructing about the image]”;
“The text accompanying the image...[followed by a summary of the text accompanying the image]”; and
“Taken in combination...[a statement about the meaning we were attributing to the postcard based on both the image and the text]”

interpreting the image prior to interpreting the text. The analysis protocol we followed comprised four parts, using sentence stems to guide the analysis in the following way, as summarised in Table 1.

The postcards in response to the ‘Research is...’ were sorted into the following themes that were identified through our inductive thematic analysis approach:

- Research as an emotional journey (6 postcards),
- Research as embodied metaphor (5 postcards), and
- Research that makes a difference (7 postcards).

The postcard images and text were then analysed in each of these categories using post-Foucauldian governmentality approaches and research *with* emotion (Prosser 2015) to illustrate how these academics resisted neoliberal, audit-driven understandings of research and instead chose to emphasise the delights of seeking new ways to understand the world in order to make a difference and to experience a life well lived. This analysis also highlights the ambivalence and uncertainty academics experience when engaging in contemporary research. In the following section we have chosen two postcards to illustrate each of the three themes that were identified from our combined analysis of the postcards.

Findings and discussion

The findings in this research foreground cathexis, the investment of mental *and* emotional energy and passion in research (Neumann 2009), along with the emotional complexities of research for academics; the research process (journey) rather than outputs (or what Brew (2001) called a trading conception of research) so reified in research audit regimes; the bodily, physical work of research and the strong desire many academics have to make a difference in the world (Gale and Parker 2013; O’Connell 2018).

Research as an emotional journey

In the first theme of research as an emotional journey, the postcards placed us, as the audience, in different times, locations and geographies as well as in different cultures. This emphasises some academics’ desires to acknowledge the multiple geographies, spaces and cultures shaping their research. This challenges European

Fig. 1 Research as an emotional journey. Sources: Top: Colleague's image (sourced from Shutterstock with standard licence) and text presented as a postcard. Bottom: Colleague's collated image Hiking Wallpapers (2016), own photograph and text presented as a postcard

Enlightenment discourses picked up in contemporary edu-capitalism and globalisation that attempt to position research and knowledge as only derived from Western cultures and, timeless (Connell 2007). The experiences of research described in these postcards as 'a beckoning delight', 'irresistible', 'an adventure', 'deep pool[s] of reflection', 'a warm embrace', 'intoxicating ... healing, liberating' have nothing to do with measurement of output for the knowledge economy. Instead they suggest the emotional connections and passions researchers have for discovering new knowledge. Yet these postcards also reflect the ambivalence and uncertainty researchers experience—research is also 'elusive, fragmented, messy and without necessary flow' and 'perplexing' and 'confusing'.

In the first postcard represented in Fig. 1, the accompanying visual image of a maze suggests that there is something to solve, a place to explore, to get lost in and to find oneself again. This image refuses neoliberal understandings of research as instrumental, fast, linear and income generating. The accompanying text in this postcard speaks to the 'irresistible' nature of the research journey, which while it can be 'elusive' and 'without necessary flow', is 'full of intrigue, anticipation and suspense'. The image in the second postcard in Fig. 1 represents three figures bushwalking with large backpacks along an elevated ridge towards a sun that is low in the sky. Juxtaposed with this image is one of a work desk with paper stand and a computer screen. These images evoke representations of research as a collaborative rather than competitive endeavour and as open-ended discovery achieved through engagement with nature, with other researchers and with ideas. The text refers to

research as ‘an adventure where we go exploring’ and a ‘deep pool of reflection’ and a ‘warm embrace of human stories’. This is a refusal of the enterprising neoliberal subjectivity focussed on productivity and the bottom line.

These images and accompanying texts acknowledge the often messy and maze-like journeys that academics take when they engage in research. These journeys challenge neoliberal representations of research as linear, transactional exercises in project management. The metaphor of research as a journey is not new. In her seminal work on conceptions of research, Brew (2001) identified a journey orientation to research. It is important to note, as Trowler (2013) has done, that this journey orientation particularly appealed to the art and design academic participants in Brew’s (2001) study. What is new in our study is that utilising visual arts-related methods allowed academics to graphically illustrate how they perceive their research work as intimately linked with their life journeys, their ever-changing subjectivities and their commitment to social justice.

Research as embodied metaphor

The second theme of responses in the postcards incorporated the use of metaphors that drew attention to an individual’s physical—embodied—activities bringing bodies, emotions and desires back into understandings of research that stand in stark contrast with the disembodied, abstract and cognitive constructions of the researcher-self generated under neoliberalism and reflecting earlier Enlightenment binaries between mind and body. It is not surprising that metaphors featured strongly in the postcards given the nature of the research activity, but what is notable is the level of emotional intensity and physicality of these representations of research given that research is usually cast as a cognitive activity. The psychedelic image in the first postcard in Fig. 2 features a spiral ending in the middle of the image with splashes and droplets. The vivid colour and movement evoked in the image resists the grayscale monotony and rigidity of the audit culture of neoliberal research. The accompanying text utilises a metaphor of learning to swim: ‘jumping headfast into the water (of questions and data)’, ‘struggling hard to keep from drowning (while sense making) through to ‘discovering how to swim (to meaningful interpretation)’. Again, a straightforward, risk-adverse, linear reading of research under neoliberalism is negated in this text.

The second postcard in Fig. 2 features a photograph of an urban setting foregrounded with an Australian Football League (AFL) football oval onto which many people have spilled, either prior to or during a break in the football game. The sporting field and the unruly assemblage of people all over the ground represents research as recreational and messy, watching from the grandstand of the irrationality of human movement and interaction. The text describes a physical act of negotiating many hurdles: weaving through the crowd (taking care to avoid children), jumping fences (all akin to gaining ethics approval to conduct research), and sitting in a seat, only to be questioned about whether the person is entitled to think of themselves as a researcher when asked ‘Are you sitting in the right seat, mate?’ This text particularly highlights the ambivalence and uncertainty researchers experience in the neoliberal

Fig. 2 Research as embodied metaphor. Sources: Top: Colleague's image (Arkley 1996) and text presented as a postcard. Bottom: Colleague's own photograph and text presented as a postcard

age—the many barriers to research and the ways in which desired performativity leaves many feeling inadequate.

These postcards evocatively capture the embodied and entangled emotional pleasures and pain academics experience when they engage in research and due to the holistic nature of researching *with* emotion, we can develop further understandings about the irrational and rational dimensions of human agency (Prosser 2015). This is particularly important in responding to neoliberal governmentalities that preclude any rendering of emotion, humour or irony (McWilliam 2002). The postcards offer a way to glimpse or see into the emotion work that academics must negotiate as they grapple with the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1979) that permeate the current academic and research landscape. As a result, these images and texts contest institutional measurement discourses that limit the expressions and possibilities of human emotion in academic work (Blackmore 2014).

Research that makes a difference

The third theme within the 'Research is...' suite of postcards is a tension between looking in—which is about being changed by the research process and learning more about the world as an individual—and looking out—which is about conducting research that brings positive benefits or makes a difference within the external world (as also emphasised in Åkerlind's (2008) account based on written data). This is

Fig. 3 Research that makes a difference. Sources: Top: Colleague's own photograph and text presented as a postcard. Bottom: Colleague's own photograph and text presented as a postcard

about imagining a socially just educational future not the social Darwinian survival of the fittest ethos of neoliberal research competition. These researchers share an “ideological commitment...which leads to passionate engagement with the research activity” (Åkerlind 2008, p. 29) rather than a transactional desire for productivity.

The image of the first postcard in Fig. 3 is of a pathway between lights snaking into the distance in a night-scape, though it is not completely dark, suggesting that this is a twilight scene. The image captures the hush of twilight when time seems to stand still, and the research answers seem to lie gleaming mysteriously in the distance. This does not evoke neoliberal understandings of research time as fast, accounted for and endlessly productive and the pathway to research findings as illuminated by the forensic glare of accountability and transparency. The accompanying text reveals that, while research can be ‘boring, frustrating, engaging and exhilarating’, it also ‘[offers] a new or different way to understand’ the world, to generate ‘benefits [for] more people’ and ‘to enable a life well lived’. This text again resists neoliberal subjectivities by emphasising the exploratory, social justice and philosophical desires that drive academic research that have nothing to do with satisfying the “metric mania” of audit (Lather and St Pierre 2013, p. 629).

The image in the second postcard in Fig. 3 captures a scene familiar to academics engaged in research: pages of readings with highlighter pen, draft writing strewn with comments and edits, reference books, a partial section of a computer screen, and a coffee mug on the dining room table. This image evokes the messy, chaotic, ever-[re]emergent nature of research fuelled by ideas, coffee and technology. The

research happens in the domestic spaces of the home, invading places for eating and living. This picture of research bears no resemblance to the shiny, tidy, office-bound (or more likely lab-based) images of research featured in contemporary university advertising material. The text describes research as being ‘hard work and thrilling’ as ‘steal[ing] work-life “balance”’. Leav[ing] me sleepless. The primary desire driving the research is: ‘is it useful?’ and ‘will it make a difference?’ Again, social justice agendas are fundamental to this representation of research rather than a desire to be an enterprising, hyper-productive self.

Our findings, therefore, illustrate the power of arts-related methods for creating new opportunities for complex, holistic discussions among academic colleagues about academic subjectivities. The combined sets of images and text act as an aesthetic mode of disruption to contemporary dominant discourses about research performance, impact and engagement or the conduct of conduct in neoliberal research (O’Connell 2018; Wilkinson 2017). Through our post-Foucauldian governmentality approach, we have foregrounded the ways in which academics adapt, contest and resist neoliberal subjectivities in their engagement with research. These are academic “subjects who refuse to know their place” (McKee 2009, p. 479) and are adept at engaging in counter-conduct and resistance to the practices of neoliberal governmentality (Baumgarten and Ullrich 2012, p. 14). These postcards provide a visual approach that extends the literature on academic identities which, with a few exceptions noted earlier, focus primarily on written evidence. They also illustrate the ways in which academics [re]position multiple individual and collective responses to higher education audit regimes, exercising their multifaceted technologies of self (Dean 1999).

Conclusion

The postcards generated through this project shed light on the many desires academics have when conducting research that have little to do with research metrics. Rather than trying to pinpoint quantifiable measures of impact and engagement featured in research performance exercises (O’Connell 2018; Wilkinson 2017), these postcards visually illustrate the powerful desire some academics have to make a difference in the world, adding new layers of meaning to Åkerlind’s (2008) findings. They challenge neoliberal attempts to commodify the social and cultural impacts of academic research evident in research assessment exercises (Wilkinson 2017). As Trowler (2013) emphasised from his research, creative art and design research is particularly well situated to capture academics’ “passionate desire to make the world a better place” (p. 58).

The academics’ postcards also draw attention to the physical, bodily dimensions of research which is often only depicted as an abstract, mental or intellectual activity. As a result, they challenge Enlightenment dualities between mind and body that are echoed in neoliberal ideologies and foreground the physical exertion necessary to engage with ideas. They are part of the movement across many Humanities and Social Science disciplines to revive sensory or sensual ways of knowing (Butler-Kisber 2010; Leavy 2015; Manathunga et al. 2018); to move beyond writing and

text as the most powerful way of representing knowledge. The production of the academics' postcards about research seeks to create sensory transdisciplinary spaces that can evoke and [re]present the ecologies of academics' work lives (Leavy 2015) and thereby provide new dimensions to the third wave of analysis of academic identities literature. They also acknowledge the complex interweaving of the emotional, the physical and material and the cognitive in research work (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009).

The textual and visual responses that academics provided about this particular facet of their work disrupt the smooth performance of research measurement. The responses also assist in "breaking taboos about scholars expressing pain and vulnerability" (Smith and Ulus 2019, p. 7) as a consequence of working in higher education. Similarly, the postcards have provided a platform for the participants to reflexively recalibrate their multiple academic selves and subjectivities offering additional insights into the nuanced conversations and emotional dimension of what research is.

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