Emerald Insight

Journal of Organizational Change Management

(Un)Conditional surrender? Why do professionals willingly comply with managerialism
Mats Alvesson André Spicer

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

(Un)Conditional surrender? Why do professionals willingly comply with managerialism

Mats Alvesson

Department of Business Administration, Lund University, Lund, Sweden, and

André Spicer

Cass Business School, London, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the question – why do professionals surrender their autonomy? This paper looks at the case of academics, in particular business school academics. It traces how this group of professionals have progressively surrendered their autonomy and complied with the demands of managerialism.

Design/methodology/approach – This largely theoretical paper looks to develop an understanding of (over)compliance with the bureaucratization of research using the four faces of power – coercive, agenda setting, ideological and discursive.

Findings – The discussion of this paper argues that the surrendering of autonomy has been reinforced through coercive forms of power like rewards and punishment and bureaucratization; manipulation and mainstreaming through pushing a particular version of research to the top of the agenda; domination through shaping norms and values; and subjectification through creating new identities.

Originality/value – The paper explores how academics deal with tensions and paradoxes such as compliance and resistance, as well as love of work and loathing of it. To deal with these paradoxes, academics often treat their work as a game and see themselves as players. While this process enables academics to reconcile themselves with their loss of autonomy, it has troubling collective outcomes: the production of increasing uninteresting and irrelevant research.

Keywords Academia, Autonomy, Power, Control

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

It is often claimed that professionals are difficult to manage. This is because they are autonomous, self-governing and have stronger loyalty to their profession than their employers. It is frequently said that managing professionals is like "herding wild cats" (Løwendahl, 1997, p. 63). The Rector of a Swedish university some years ago gave a talk with some emotion emphasizing that "the organization needs to be improved. We must make sure that decisions are implemented. Decisions cannot be treated any longer as elements open for debate". This tradition of debate still tends to dominate in many universities. Academics ask for good arguments, not instructions on how they might perform better in a measurement exercise. Most academics, even in business schools, claim that they do their work out of love (Clarke *et al.*, 2012). Instrumental concerns seem to come second.

Professionals, we are told, value autonomy. There are many examples of professionals surrendering their autonomy in the face of managerial change agendas. It has happened in health care, as management systems have been imported from automobile manufacturing, to control the workflow of doctors. It has happened in law as traditional partnerships have become corporations. Now even priests are being

sent on management training courses in business schools. In each of these cases, there has been ongoing skirmishes. But on the whole many professionals seem to have surrendered their highly valuable autonomy. Why?

One striking example of this process can be seen in universities. If there is one group of professionals who are supposed to value autonomy very highly, it is academics. But in the last few decades many academics have been very "flexible" when it comes to this virtue. Sure, there are frequent complaints about the loss of autonomy. Some savvy academics have made a career out of doing this. But, on the whole, many academics have complied with managerial diktats and the creeping emphasis on instrumental rewards. This stands in stark contrast with traditional understandings of academics as difficult to manage. How come there has been so little resistance and so much compliance?

This quandary is nicely captured by Slawomir Magala (2009), who points out that most academics have caught themselves up with professional bureaucracy which severely curtails their autonomy. They comply with this system in the pursuit of the promise of upward mobility. Yet they want to maintain a fantasy of themselves as radicals who identify with the underdog. To keep this fantasy alive, they organize fringe conferences and academic meetings to discuss avant garde cinema, dissect post-war European philosophy or stage theatrical events they have penned. They may play at being radical, but they are almost totally compliant in their day to day work. How did this happen?

In this paper we try to answer these puzzling questions by looking at instances when academics comply with new forms of managerial control. In particular, we explore how academics working in business schools have enthusiastically complied. To explain why this happens, we argue it is necessary to consider the role of power. We argue that all four faces of power – coercive, agenda setting, ideological and discursive – seem to be at work in driving academics to comply with the current managerial regime. But what is particularly interesting is that this compliance is not straight forward. It is riddled with paradoxes such as compliance and resistance; love of academic labour and cynical loathing of it. To cope with these paradoxes, academics begin to see their work as a game which can be played. This game involves not just strategic compliance with the rules of "research" (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012), but a kind of gaming of different positions. When this happens, apparently autonomous professionals can get so tightly wound up with the playing with power relations, they stop thinking outside the game, they avoid asking questions and just enthusiastically comply.

By pointing out how professionals surrender their autonomy through dynamics of gaming, we hope to make a number of contributions. First, we add to the growing literature looking at conditions of work for professionals in business schools (e.g. Clarke and Knights, 2014). We build on the observations that many critical management scholars see their research work as a kind of game (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012). We point out that this has much wider application, and helps to explain how people can willingly relinquish their autonomy in the face of increasing managerial demands. Second, we add to the wider debate about growing managerialism within the university sector as a whole and the broader implications this has for professional autonomy (e.g. Magala, 2009; Collini, 2012). We do this by drawing attention to how academics have not just been forced to comply with managerial demands – in many cases, they have actually been willing and sometimes even enthusiastically comply. Third, we also hope to make a wider contribution to the ongoing debate about the control of professionals (e.g. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004). Over the last decade or so, this literature has largely highlighted the role which identity regulation plays in this process. Building on what we – and indeed others have observed – we think it is

worthwhile considering how professions can be controlled through gaming. Finally, we think there are some important practical implications of our argument. We think it is necessary to think through double-talk (scorning Research Excellence Framework (REF) and managerialism while smoothly complying with it) which seems to play a role in the current capitulation to increasingly excessive managerial demands. Simply producing ever louder denunciations of the latest managerial initiatives is unlikely to be enough. We think what is needed is a degaming of academics.

To make these contributions, we start with some observations of how business schools downplay the objective of offering good education and intellectual qualifications and instead focus on other purposes, like helping students to fake their ability to employers "employability". We then point out how managerialism has become increasingly dominant at universities. As a result, the purpose of scholarship (meaningful knowledge) has given way to maximizing publication possibilities. We then argue that this can be explained by looking at the combination of various forms of power dynamics. We note these different power dynamics can create some interesting paradoxes. We then highlight how academics deal with these paradoxes through treating them as a "game" which needs to be "played". We conclude by noting how this push towards gaming might be challenged.

The managed university

The increasing importance of management and the impact of this on universities – and the academics who work in them – is not difficult to miss (Collini, 2012). What was once thought to be an institution with its own logic, rituals and administrative tradition has come to increasingly resemble any other (over) managed organization. Academics have found themselves working in professional bureaucracies which promise upward mobility through compliance with ranking systems (Magala, 2009). Universities are now replete with many of the similar "management innovations" which are common in large corporations: they have quality control systems, performance measurement, branding initiatives, marketing and communication units, strategy exercises, visionary leaders, hedging strategies and alliance building initiatives. This strong belief in and widespread use of systems, procedures and initiatives driven by managers is what we refer to as managerialism.

What to make of all this divides opinion. For some this is a step in the right direction. All these managerial initiatives address the inefficiencies and sloppiness of a field which has been sleepy for too long. According to enthusiasts, by adopting modern management practices, universities can begin to more effectively deliver on their mission. Quality initiatives like the UK's REF, some claim, have played a central role in transforming many universities from academic sleepy backwaters into cutting edge global centres of excellence.

For others, the rise of managerialism in universities is a problem (e.g. Collini, 2012). Critics point out how the rise of management metrics has seen the decline of traditional values which had underpinned the university. Scholarly virtues such as the pursuit of truth and meaningful and important intellectual contributions are under threat. These changes are thought to be fuelling a longer term decline in the quality of education students receive, the amount of path breaking research being created and a degradation of standards of work in academia.

Irrespective of the side one takes, there still seems to be a mystery here. Instead of putting in place new management systems because they will help to deliver important objectives, it appears many university managers adopt new practices for what are often

the most superficial reasons (e.g. others are doing it, it will make us look world class). What is more the over-adoption of these ideas often takes up significant resources which could go into delivering on the core missions of the university. What is even more surprising is that most academics typically respond with a kind of passive disdain: they think the ideas are stupid, yet they are willing to cynically "play the game". This means managers and academics exist in an embrace characterized by perceived managerial stupidity on the one hand and professional cynicism on the other.

These same academics often remain more or less complicit with the process. Sometimes this comes in the form of active complicity such as when a professor suddenly lends their support to a managerial initiative. However, this is only a fairly limited part of how academics respond to managerialism. What is much more common is cynical complicity. This happens when academics think protest will do no good, or will suck up precious time which could be used for doing more pressing things, i.e. fostering their careers. The result is vociferous complaints which are often matched with a practical acceptance of an apparently woeful state of affairs. The question that any academic who wants to maintain a lustrous self-image (and that is most) must answer, is how does one square one's own intellectual commitment to reason, critique and other fine characteristics with one's own practical commitment to what they think is a stupid system?

Four by four factories

One of the most obvious terrains on which this cynical compliance appears to be at work is in the part of the job that many academics see as being most meaningful research. There has been a movement from more pluralistic approaches to research (where a wide range of forms of research were seen as appropriate) to a myopic focus on publishing in highly ranked journals. The numbers of journal articles published by a researcher and the level of the journal in which they appear has moved from a modest issue to a major concern. For some it has become almost the only concern. Having something important, relevant and meaningful to say seems to have become comparatively less important than doing and publishing research that appears in the right journal.

The overriding focus on journal publications has been reinforced by reward systems. In recent years, it has become common to promote people with little breadth of achievements but a few publications in the right journals to professorships. Some schools throughout Europe offer hefty bonuses (in the tens of thousands of euros) for the publication of articles in top ranked journals. Publishing articles in a handful of highly ranked journals has become the only way new academics can secure a relative stable job at a "good" institution. The flip-side of rewards for publication is increasingly harsh punishments – or at least a fear of sanctions – for those who do not perform on these narrow criteria. For instance, Martin Parker's (2014) account of Euro Business School (EBS) reports how "at least one member of staff who was deemed to be failing on ABS terms was paid a considerable amount of money to take severance, also subject to signing a confidentiality agreement. The fact that he also happened to have won every teaching prize that EBS and the university offered appeared not to matter" (p. 286). On the other hand, the mass industry of higher education and in particular business schools call for an army of lecturers of which the majority have nor will not have articles in highly ranked journals – so there are many, in particular lowly ranked institutions employing people with a mediocre research record.

Still, the construction of the ideal and norm of "everybody" needing to publish in ranked journals dominates and there is some reality behind this. Many UK business

school academics emphasize that only journal articles "count", and that books and other writings are not rewarded. An overriding concern for many academics is the "4 by 4" formula – publishing four journal articles in journals which are ranked as four star by list like the Association of Business Schools. Often this is not something held at a distance by academics. Instead it can be experienced as a deep indicator of one's excellence. In many cases, one's performance becomes a currency for overt status displays. As one senior British management academic put it on e-mail list: "I wish I had a fiver for every time I've heard academics say 'I've got x number of 4 star papers'".

Turning universities into "4 by 4" factories may be efficient for organizing knowledge production. It certainly has financial advantages for many people. Having a system to create accountability, a "fair" distribution of resources and ensure academics produce something with the time they are given to do research is reasonable. Producing four good contributions to knowledge in seven years also seems to be a reasonable demand. Peer assessment based on a combination of the format of the publication and reading texts also sounds fine.

Despite the fact that many of the features of the overarching assessment system seem entirely acceptable, it is increasingly evident that it may be backfiring. Instead of improving the "excellence" of research produced by academics, it may be having exactly the opposite effect. Many of the outcomes which this system has produced seem doubtful. One often hears about how much of the research which is currently produced by business schools lacks broader relevance and offers little in the way of interesting or innovative new ideas. It has become common to complain how papers in the highest ranked journals are generally uninteresting and irrelevant (e.g. Grey, 2010; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). It seems the only time anyone consults this work is when they themselves want to write an article for a similar journal (Gabriel, 2010). This presumably creates a tight circle of bored writers reading boring articles so they can write yet another boring article for other writers that need to look at these for their literature reviews. Perhaps many scholars would prefer much of the work they are expected to be familiar with and refer to not to be written at all, so they would not be forced to read it in order to demonstrate their knowledge of the literature in the subfield.

One of reasons why reading journal articles can be so unappealing is that they have become documents of discipline. Rigorous compliance with standards is far more important than having something interesting or relevant to say. This is because the format of leading journals is similar to bureaucracy (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). To be sure, increased bureaucracy creates many positive things: clear guidelines and rules, standardization of work, increased efficiency, development of specialized skills, smooth and predictable evaluation processes, the elimination of nasty surprises and anxiety limitation. But increased focus on formulaic papers has created many of the dysfunctions of bureaucracy: limited imagination and creativity, predictable products, a bureaucratic writing style, strong sub-specialization, the (over)exploitation of a limited "competence" and evaluations based on tick-box processes. When researchers feel constrained by different rules and standards, they tend to play it safe by imitating what others have done – so called gap-spotting (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). All this limits the chances of unexpected, challenging and surprising ideas. As a result, articles in leading journals score high on rigour and incremental contribution, but they fail to say very much which is novel or makes a strong social impact (Bartunek *et al.*, 2006; Clark and Wright, 2009).

We have produced a system where a reworked version of Winston Churchill's famous soundbite would seem apt: "never before in human history have so many had so little to say to so few"[1].

Given this sad state of affairs, we should not be surprised at increasingly cynical comments made about our own field such as "In general I see very few people doing work they think important for anything but the tenure and promotion treadmill" (senior academic), or "there are more unqualified people pumping more crap into more unread outlets than ever before in history" (retired academic). Despite this fury, there seems to be kind of resigned acceptance that, in the words of one academic writing on an e-mail list, "the only thing that seems to count for every faculty is the churning out of endless streams of publications" (senior academic). The extent of this resignation is well captured by another UK-based academic, who pointed out that:

League-tableism is not up for negotiation. As Aesop nicely points out for us, well, for me at least, the archer is entirely indiscriminate and has absolutely no regard for the eagles or the scrawny feathered among us, but we ourselves seemingly have no genuine collective will or even anything close to a shared view of how to resist. Why is that? (academic).

Explaining (over)compliance
What is surprising for us is not that the current bureaucratization of research has produced increasingly irrelevant and uninteresting research. We all know bureaucracy is boring. What is more puzzling is the strong overadaptation to this system by academics themselves. One would expect that there might be a balance between the demands of journal system on the one hand and academic values on the other[2]. The journal system has many advantages but as with all systems it needs to be balanced with cultural orientations supporting good judgement, professional integrity and a strong sense of what is meaningful and relevant. This does not seem to have happened. Many academics have practically surrendered traditional academic values in favour of commitment to the discipline and instrumentalism of the journal system. As a result, a system aimed at measure and reward quality has been turned into a system of concertive control which academics enforce on each other (Barker, 1993). The excessive focus on journal and journal lists may have been pushed from above by senior management keen on easy metrics – but it has also been enforced from "below" by the academic community itself. We would like to ask how has this happened? Why is it that resourceful people who are supposed to be driven by a strong set of shared values, intrinsic motivation and are traditionally considered to be difficult to control have become compliant and (self) disciplining enforcers of a system they themselves think – or at least often say – is stupid? Or perhaps rather functionally stupid, i.e. is a disinclination to carefully consider meaningfulness or relevance or engage in critical reflection (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012).

We think that existing ideas about power and control in organization studies may provide a useful guide to answer these questions. We will consider the interplay between four faces of power which are commonly found in organizations: coercion through hierarchy, manipulation and mainstreaming through agenda setting, domination through shaping accepted ideas and values and subjectivation through shaping an accepted sense of self (Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Hardy, 1994). In what follows, we look into each of these faces in some more depth and explain how they have driven (over)compliance.

Coercion through hierarchy
During recent decades there have been marked structural changes in the higher education sector. A central aspect of this has been marketization. Initially, this was driven by international competition and recruitment of overseas students.

However, successive governments have raised student fees for nationals and changed policies to allow private providers into the sector. Over time this has created a fully fledged market in university education in some countries like the UK.

In addition to increasing market pressures, universities have found themselves under intensifying pressure to comply with other "institutionalized myths" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). To win wider legitimacy, they have to conform with widely shared assumptions about what a good organization should look like. This often involves emulating practices which can be found in other organizations. Some examples include showing they have strategic visions, human resource management systems, branding functions, addressing diversity and so on. All this creates a pressure to add new functions to the university.

Marketization and the demand to comply with an ever expanding range of institutional myths has driven a rapid expansion of administration in universities. Recent statistics show that administrative staff now outnumber faculty at over half of the UK's universities (Jump, 2015). At the London Business School, administrators make up 85 per cent of the total employees. One US-based academic recently released a book in which he warned about the rise of the "All administrative university" (Ginsberg, 2012). In it, he documents how between 1985 and 2005, the number of students in US universities had grown by 56 per cent, the number of faculty increased by 50 per cent, the number of administrators has grown by 85 per cent and the number of administrative assistants grew by 230 per cent. Looking at the difference between public and private universities is instructive. In public universities, the number of administrators grew by 66 per cent. The figure was 135 per cent in private universities. Contrary to popular belief, the level of bureaucratization of the public sector as a whole has actually increased with the marketization of the sector (McSweeney, 2006; Graeber, 2015). Indeed the institutions which are most exposed to market pressures (i.e. private sector institutions) also have the most bureaucracy (in the form of administrators). This reflects a continued de-emphasis on core practices in favour of managerialism, looking good and imitating others (and adopting a lot of functions irrelevant or even undermining good research and education).

The growth of administration has gone hand-in-hand with the increasing power of managers. A large managerial infrastructure has developed to control the expanding numbers of administrative staff. There has been a multiplication of academics mainly doing managerial work. One piece of evidence around this is the expansion of deans in many universities. In his study of US academia, Ginsberg (2012) documents the expansion of the what he calls "Deanlets" and "dealings" – people appointed to associate or assistant dean positions for all sorts of things from student experience to social media. As the number of managerial positions has expanded, the role of "collegiate control" by the faulty of decision making has decreased. In an increasingly familiar account, Parker (2014) documents how the new Dean of one UK business school eliminated the entire committee system and centralized decision-making power around himself. As a result most checks and balances of the Dean's power by the business school were eliminated. This left the Dean free to pursue increasingly strange courses of costly activity.

All this means that academic control is being significantly weakened. The rise of "academic managerialism" means deans now have legitimacy and formal power to make decisions about faculty activities based on research output. However, these same Deans are in turn measured on the basis of various national or global standards – such as research rankings. In the UK for instance, many deans and vice chancellors have parts of their pay tied to the performance of their institutions in the national research

auditing exercise. They often do not necessarily approve of being exposed to what may be seen as competition and ranking based on simplified and arbitrary measures that invite manipulation. Nonetheless, they feel that they need to adapt (Sauder and Espeland, 2009). In one UK business school, the Dean often begins his speech to various audiences by pointing out that he is a statistician, so he knows how statistics can be made to lie. He then goes on to run through the various statistics showing the good performance of the school on a range of metrics.

Academics are by no means innocent. Deans have become dependent on, what can sometimes be, a small group of academics who are deemed to be highly productive according to the criteria which many deans distrust but nonetheless go along with. This reinforces the status and power base of those deemed to be high performers. This small group has at times been able to transform their power into favourable conditions (such as lower teaching loads, plentiful conference budgets, no administration, etc.) and higher pay. This often means that what is seen as the academic elite are often disinclined to undermine managerialism – as they can sidestep many of the disadvantages and profit from the privileges of the system.

Manipulation and mainstreaming through agenda setting

The various ranking exercises have placed issues of research performance at the top of the agenda in many universities. This can be easily observed by the amount of time and resources that is spent on these issues – up to the highest levels of universities. In the past research was something which was discussed in the seminar room. During the past two decades, it has entered into the committee room in a big way. Indeed, there has been an explosion of discussion about "research" and an expansion of the range of administrative forums (such as committee meetings) for this discussion to take place. "Research" has become an increasing item for hallway discussion and gossip in universities. Within scholarly communities there has been a curious shift in focus with the explosion of workshops focused on issues like "how to publish", "how to win grants" and "how to achieve impact". What is so striking about many of these discussions is that they are not about the actual content of the research as such. Instead, they focus on the more formalistic elements. For instance, during informal discussions, you can easily talk to a colleague about research for hours, hear long lists of names of journals and precise impact factors, but hear nothing about the actual content on the research which they are doing. Author biographies in journals are often dominated by a list of the journals in which the author has published.

All this highlights that "research" (and a very particular formalistic definition of research which can be found in various ranking systems) has become a key agenda item. Challenging this agenda – for instance, by bringing up the harm a strong focus on journal publication in highly ranked journals can have – seems difficult. This is because the credibility of the existing agenda is, despite all the critique, fairly strong. Although many attribute this to the increasing strength of managerialism in the university, there is also a strong element of community control at work. Academics choose to talk incessantly with one another about their performance in research assessment activities. They have also played a role in pushing "research" (in particular the formalistic elements of it) up the agenda of university committees. And after all, why would academic staff not want to advance the importance of "research" on the university's agenda? It is something which they are told incessantly is the most important, meaningful and rewarding part of the job. This all lends a certain degree of legitimacy to the whole issue which makes it difficulty to argue against.

One way in which those aiming to resist the formalistic "research" agenda do so is through publishing journal articles pointing out the problems. As a result, there is an expanding body of journal publications in highly ranked journals which question the emphasis on journal lists, the current journal format and so on. This is, of course, a glaring paradox here. You try to critique a form by using the very form which you are questioning. In some spheres of life this might be a very clever and subversive move indeed. In the business school, it is just another chance to add a line to your CV. Such attempts at resistance fuel the very institution which they are supposed to challenge and undermine. We should here add that we, the authors of this paper, are as guilty of this as many others. (We do, however, also work in other ways – internally within our institutions and in public debate to create changes in higher education.)

There are certainly other attempts to challenge the "research" agenda. These may come in the form of attempts to reformulate the constitution of the agenda item (what counts as "research"), or re-prioritize other agenda items (such as teaching, administration, public engagement, etc.). Often both these processes can prove to be difficult. A person who tries to question the priority of research might risk being marginalized as low performers (according to "research"-based criteria) and therefore lacking credibility to challenge existing arrangements. Those who do benefit from current arrangements are probably going to be rather disinterested in changing an agenda they benefit from. In such contexts, credibility and motivation to complain usually contradict each other.

Domination through shaping norms and values

Most academics at least claim to loath strict regimes for assessing and thereby controlling their work. It is common to hear doubts about journal ranking lists, the REF, the "4 by 4" and so on. In fact, expressing these doubts is an important part of ongoing informal social interaction in UK universities. Such research assessment procedures are commonly seen as a manifestation of the broader neo-liberal ideology within academic life. What is interesting is how this wider neo-liberal discourse is dealt with. Most actors do not find neo-liberalism particularly convincing on an intellectual level. Indeed, there are many academics who have made fine careers critiquing the failings of neo-liberalism. However, what is particularly interesting is how academics relate to this set of ideas. Anger seems to be matched with resignation. At least in the UK, neo-liberalism has progressively marginalized all other political discourses (such as social democracy and conservativism) during the past three or four decades. This has led UK academics to resigning themselves to it within their own professional sphere. They feel that all the battles have been lost, and that they are not going to be won within the university. A routine script has become "we know we are defeated, so we are quiet from the start". Defeatism rules. This helps to legitimize compliance: it starts to be viewed as rather intelligent to adapt and be realistic. This leads to and legitimizes an "ideology of opportunism": it is good to be realistic, to adapt conditions and be loyal with colleagues and institutions in manipulations so we will look good in assessments and rankings.

Although there may be a defeatist acceptance of neo-liberal ideas in universities, there are other ideas which have been most positively and wholeheartedly embraced. These are often professional values which appeal to peak performances, elitism and "excellence". There is also the lure of academic celebrity. Being known, being read and being influential is clearly a central concern. High-status knowledge has an international appeal. Cosmopolitanism ideologically outscores local orientations.

Alongside the allure of being seen as part of an international elite, there is also the appeal of some idea about accountability. Having considerable discretion and

ample time to do research is strongly valued. This calls not just for a Laissez-Faire approach but a clear delivery of something that is perceived as a knowledge contribution. The quality check of the peer review here fits nicely. And it is very difficult to find an alternative to this. A boss review, pal review or a self-review are all inferior to the peer review for quality control, accountability, feedback and resource allocation in academia.

Grandiosity is also valued by academics. Expectations and demands are rising. More and more people want status and identity confirmation. Within post-affluent society and their accompanying culture of narcissism, there is a strong orientations towards rapid careers and more impressive titles (Alvesson, 2013; Foley, 2010). One place this can be see in universities is the explosion of the number of professors. During the 1970s, there were 4,000 professors in the UK. Now there are nearly 20,000. Promotions seem to be more common in business schools than in many other areas. In UK during the 1980s, leading academics could be lecturers for extended periods and expect promotion only after making significant contributions. Today, people with modest records of achievement expect much quicker progress, in particular in business schools. Some older staff members we have spoken with claim it is probably easier to become a professor today than a senior lecturer 25 years ago. This signals and reinforces an ideological shift from more intrinsic values towards instrumental values like careerism, titles and wages. Most academics still express a degree of love for their work and its intrinsic value. However the increased salience of instrumental aspects reduce the importance of intrinsic aspects (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). We have moved from meaning to motivation (Sievers, 1986), from what is important and meaningful to what is being rewarded.

Subjectification through shaping selves

The fourth key ingredient in the surrender of autonomy entails changes in how academics see themselves. An important aspect of this is the strange seductiveness of rankings, performance measurement and similar systems. What is so striking is that whilst academics are often unhappy, or even downright critical of these techniques, they also embrace and in some cases even revel in them. This can be clearly witnessed in a typical account of the REF. Usually such accounts start out by expressing disdain and pointing out the problems with the system. Then they switch to outlining the speaker's own personal performance – or perhaps the performance of their institution. This creates a rather strange double think whereby academics both claim to loathe the control system which they find themselves subjected to and also measure their own self-worth in terms of it. In a sense we have here an outsourcing of meaning (Magala, 2009), from associated with work to what is being evaluated and rewarded by others.

Such a compromised position might be seen as an outcome of a gradual process. Entering the business school context itself often is seen to require certain compromises on the part of some academics. Here is how one professor, with a critical/sociological orientation, puts it:

Although perhaps changing now, many/most UK b-school professors – myself included – in some way started their academic careers by making a compromise or perhaps even in their own minds "selling out". The compromise, of course, was to work in a b-school in the first place rather than in a "proper" subject field, perhaps in one of the social sciences (though also in some cases maths, history etc.). So perhaps in having made this first compromise, we are then more willing and more adept at making further compromises. Perhaps we say to ourselves that "we may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb". Perhaps we imagine that we

will only compromise so far and no further but because the process of compromise happens gradually we never recognise when we have reached, or crossed, that line. Perhaps also we are resistant to recognising our compromises since we are innured by our first sell-out. Well, this becomes rather speculative of course, but the underlying fact of the background of UK faculty is not speculative even if its consequences are[3].

What is striking here is the contrast which is set up between the apparent purity or at least superiority of "proper" disciplines (social science, history, maths are all mentioned) and the intellectually sullied space of the business school. Having to move from a more "pure" object of identification (a proper discipline) to a much more questionable one (the business school) is experienced as the "first sell-out" which may be followed by more.

There are further elements to this process of subjectification: publishing is often not just a form of intellectual work – it becomes a kind of identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). When measured on the basis of outcomes, we find our naked and exposed self at stake. We are even more vulnerable when outcomes are crystalized through a numerical system and put on public display through something like Google Scholar. When this happens research publications start to be seen by oneself – and indeed others – as reflecting personal qualities such as intelligence, creativity, scholarship, efficiency and commitment. This is exacerbated by the fact there is an element of choice involved in academia: people to a high degree choose their topic, research question, method, writing style, collaborations and where they attempt to publish their work. This means their work can be experienced as being more of an individual outcome. Named authorship which directly ties the work to the researcher further underlines this. As a result, publication becomes a way of working up a positive image of who you are. Failure to publish becomes not just a work issue, it becomes a wound on yourself.

This creates almost a one-to-one relationship between a research outcomes (such as journal publications) and a sense of academic self. Although research depends on collective efforts, builds on tradition and is strongly influenced by feedback, it is nonetheless experienced as profoundly individual in nature. The identity regulatory effects of journal publishing and the entire process leading up to this becomes very strong. To see this, all you need to do is to take a look at the short biographies which academics include at the end of a publication. Usually, they spend half the space presenting themselves in terms of which journals have they published in. The narrative lurking behind this appears to be: I am the journals in which I have published in. Perhaps we are not far away from a situation where instead of listing degrees and professional qualifications after one's names, academics will start listing their publications. When this happens, academics might hand over business cards which read like this:

Max Manageman. (ASQ, AMJ, AMR, OS, JMS, HR).

Research Professor.

Developments in technology are likely to further ratchet up public displays of achievement. Easily available information such as citation rates, H-scores and much more have created an extremely high level of transparency and visibility. Within a few clicks, you can find a researcher's Google Scholar profile and assess their relative worth by looking at their H-score (even if you know absolutely nothing about their field). At many institutions now, when potential faculty are interviewed, the panel are given

documents assessing their research performance using metrics such as the *H*-score. Some scholars have tried to smooth this process by just including their citation rates and *H*-scores at the top of their CV. Maybe the next step will be just to write your *H*-score on the badge each academic wears at conferences. In this way, everyone will instantly know whether you are worth talking with or not.

Yiannis Gabriel (2005) uses the metaphors of glass cage and glass palace to illuminate these kinds of hyper-transparent organizations. For him, these are organizations which are characterized by incessant visibility and constant surveillance. This arrangement, he points out, prompts a kind of exhibitionism where the occupants of transparent cages always put themselves on show and making a spectacle out of themselves. In the academic glass cage, your research outputs are rendered constantly visible – for all to see. But what is even more fascinating is that instead of waiting for authorities to see and assess them, many academics seem to scream out to be seen. To gain attention, they make a research spectacle out of themselves – constantly displaying their outputs in a way which is there for all to see. New technologies such as social media make this task much easier.

In sum: juggling scripts

The four faces of power we find at work in academic life overlap and reinforce each other. Coercive power such as commands from deans to "publish or else" do not work on their own. It could easily lead to powerful resistance. Direct instances of power need to be linked with a robust agenda around "research" which is strongly supported by notions such as "research excellence". In addition these values need to be linked in turn with strong forms of identity regulation and identity work. Perhaps the most interesting aspect is how this entire system has become so efficiently self-regulated and seems to have largely produced complicit and committed participants who incessantly tell each other – and themselves – to focus on "what counts": publishing in high-ranked journals.

This produces selective neglect. Large swathes of academic life are overlooked. Teaching becomes seen as something to be avoided if possible and is often passed onto junior faculty or teaching-only staff. Administration becomes seen as a pesky interruption to be passed off to those with an interest in such matters. This of course creates perfect conditions for the further concentration of power and the dissolution of the process of collegial control.

As well as creating neglect, the myopic focus on "research" has also generated significant effort. Researchers plow thousands of hours of their lives into "crafting" articles for submission, dealing with reviews, networking and much more. In most cases, it means the academic working day extends far into the night. And what is the result of this great labour? A constant flow of articles, which are judged by an increasing number of academics to be pointless technical exercises which are uninteresting, make little in the way of real contribution and have no impact beyond a marginal amount on a small group of specialists.

However, this is not just a story of overwhelming compliance. As we have already indicated, there seems to be constant shuttling between enthusiastic compliance and bitter complaint. At one moment the researcher complains about the unsavoury effects of the overwhelming focus on research. The next moment, they are heading back to the desk for a long session working on their next journal article. An important part of this habitus seems to be the ability to combine resistance and compliance; the romantic love of academic labour and cynical suspicion of it in the very same gesture. The question we would like to ask in the next section is how it is possible to combine these paradoxical demands.

Playing the game
Academics – like other people working in complex settings – must be able to deal with contradictions and paradox (Magala, 2009). They should be able to shuttle between compliance and resistance; a romanticized love of their labours and a cynical suspicion of them. Each position offers a well-established script. When speaking from the compliant script, they claim "I am (or hope/want/expect to be) a 4 by 4 person". Then the resistance script comes out, and the line becomes: "I'm against this whole system, I'm only pretending to comply". The romantic script claims: "I love my work". And the cynic finishes it off by sneering: "I see through all the crap".

Holding fast to one of these scripts leads to difficulties. Relentless compliance can turn you into a clone. Constant resistance can create big push back from authority figures. Always being romantic about your work can break your heart. Cynicism can dry up the last ounces of belief. To avoid these problems, academics learn to juggle different scripts. The well-adapted person can blend and balance. They can express one attitude in an academic seminar while discussing a paper, another in a department meeting when looking at performance metrics, a third in the pub as they complain to a colleague and something entirely different when they are at home offloading onto a spouse. Such blending and juggling scripts is tough. How exactly do academics cope?

We think an important way to help juggling these contradictions is to see work as a "game" and see oneself as a player. If you listen to even just a small sample of academics talking about their work and the pressures which are put upon them, you will be struck by just how frequently this metaphor is used. A recent study of UK academics found gaming to be a commonly used metaphor. Producing journal publications for the REF was seen as "playing the game". Butler and Spoelstra (2012) conclude that "many of our respondents admitted that they put a great deal of work into tailoring their paper to the meet the expectations of editors and reviewers" (p. 894). They also suggest that the game tends to master its players, rather than the other way around. Some commentators say that management scholars "now have more capital in gaming skills than in scholarship" (Macdonald and Kam, 2011, p. 472).

Why is it that self-declared critics are so fond of such a frivolous metaphor when talking about their "calling"? Perhaps the central advantage is that by seeing themselves as a "player" who participates in a "game" one is able to develop some kind of distance and reduce one's commitment to any particular script. You do not need to be completely compliant or resistant. Nor do you need to be either utterly romantic or thoroughly cynical. All you need to be good at is playing the game. If you are a player, you can put aside any serious questions about the contradictions which you face. Instead, you can focus on honing one's skills at playing the game. What is even more striking is that by seeing the whole undertaking as a game, a professional can imagine that they are not at all reducible to the game. Instead they are somehow apart from it or superior to it. They can also harbour the fantasy they can step away from the game and leave when they might want.

On the face of it, "playing the game" seems to be what many people do. It allows them to preserve some energy, commitment and perhaps their sense of self for other things. Playing indicates a pragmatic response, not any deeper compliance to any particular script. Moreover, it can help to preserve the idea that beneath or beyond the player there is a non-playing self. Academics can also legitimize their own involvement and compliance by pretending that they really "see through it all" and therefore have an autonomous standing on the subject matter (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Kunda, 1992).

The idea that you are "playing" adds a dimension of awareness: it feeds the idea that the player stands above the game and is not a sucker. Instead they exhibit a

meta-understanding. Butler and Spoelstra (2012), for instance, point out that "critical management scholars therefore 'play the game' at the same time as they condemn its rule or lament its consequences" (p. 898). The successful person playing the game smoothly interacts with performance management and is rewarded accordingly. Yet they also are able to distance themselves from this by doing a fair amount of identity work which bolsters a sense of self that is not too blemished. The game playing romantic who engages in a little minor resistance and lots of compliance seems to be the formula for success.

The game playing metaphor may appear as an entirely subjective response, but it needs to be understood in relationship to other forces of power. The game is not chosen, but imposed by hierarchy and agenda setting. These forces offer rules and constraints. "You have to […]" is part of the metaphor. It is a game you are forced to play. These rules, however, are constructed as somewhat flexible and soft, for the game player. Of course, people do not say "play the game" if they face or fear losing their jobs. Ideologies offer strong cultural support for game playing.

Conclusion

In this paper we have addressed the issue of how academics, more specifically business school academics, have responded to the rise of managerialism. There is, of course, much variation, but compliance seems to be a common, if not, a dominant response. We think this is rather unexpected. One would assume that a high-status group with a strong work commitment would be difficult to change. In fact it appeared to be quite the opposite. The growing body of research on business schools suggests many academics have been active (although not particularly willing) participants in the process. We see this as a mystery, and we have set out to ask why.

To begin to address this mystery, we turned to the work on power. In particular, we argued that the (un)conditional surrender of professional autonomy can be explained by looking at the role which power plays. Clearly exercises of coercive power in the form of increasing managerial hierarchy, the use of incentives such as bonuses for publication and increasingly punitive punishments for "non performance" have been important. But this would not have worked if it was not backed up by a particular conception of research rising rapidly to the top of the agenda of both formal and informal discussions in universities. This has been further underpinned by a defeatist acceptance of neo-liberal ideas, which are then combined with other "traditional" academic values such as competition, excellence as well as a wider desire for grandiosity. All this is made personal – as research work has morphed into identity work. It has been further reinforced by new technologies which can immediately make one's research performance visible.

However, this is not a straight forward story of compliance. Throughout we have noted that academics seem to shuttle between apparent opposites: compliance and resistance, love of academic labour and cynical loathing of it. To manage this complex identity juggling act, many academics see their working lives as a "game" which needs to be "played". This creates a certain distance from the often very difficult roles which they have to take on. Perhaps this makes the constant juggling a little easier to bare. It also makes things easier for their organizations to manage their employees. The only problem is that it has created a glut of research which is uninteresting and says little of significance to a larger audience.

What this suggests is that if we are indeed serious about creating scholarship which is both more interesting and more engaging, then simply demanding academics start being interesting and engaging is unlikely to work. Instead, we need to look at the deeper power

relations at work within universities that reproduce much of the uninteresting and irrelevant research. Of course there is a need to change rewards and punishments to ensure academics are encouraged to produce work which goes beyond a narrow list of journals. Writing research-based texts for a larger audience seems vital. There is also the need to rethink the increasing creep of managed bureaucracy within universities which has in turn produced much bureaucratized research.

Interventions need to go beyond these obvious aspects. There are also needs for a re-evaluation of the official and unofficial agenda within universities. This might involve asking whether putting "research" (or at least a certain vision of it) near the top of university agendas is actually doing research any good. Is it actually creating lots of talk about research and less action? Furthermore, we may need to revisit some of the deeper values undergirding research activities. For instance is a defeatist attitude still warranted? Should other values be revived beyond "academic excellence", or should these core values be revived in a different way?

Another pressing question is whether the current kind of identity work which is so closely attached to publication is actually very healthy. Does it create mindless research robots? Ineffective resistors? Heart-broken research lovers? Bitter cynics? Perhaps another version of the academic subject is needed. If we think this is the case, we need to ask how might these new subjectivities be created? For instance, what kinds of socialization processes might be needed instead of a stodgy diet of top tier journal articles, three paper theses and endless series of "how to publish" workshops which PhD students currently subsist on?

However, we think that the most pressing question is whether it is possible to think about academic work as not being a game. Maybe it is time to call "game-over". One simple step is to set up a charity fund in each department and charge five euros each time someone says "you have to play the game".

Notes

1. When the first author originally used this phrase in a panel discussion at EGOS, it received spontaneous applause from an audience of over 300 people. It clearly seemed to resonate with the mood in the Organisation Studies community in July 2015. Perhaps the phrase was made even more prescient because the conference was being held in Athens during a week when the banks were closed and tens of thousands of people were protesting on the street every evening. If you looked at the overwhelming majority of papers being presented, you would see little sign of the fact that many European economies were in deep financial crisis. This strange disconnection between scholarship and reality was brought to a head during the evening conference dinner which was held on a finely manicured athletics field halfway between two huge street protests. When the protests ended, many of the activists passed by the athletics field and starred at the conference goers, who by this time were dancing to middle-of-the-road music. The whole scene resembled an upscale summer wedding party.

2. An incomplete list of these in no particular order might include: developing interesting and valuable knowledge, publishing one's work in a variety of formats, emphasizing work and ideas rather than outputs, seeing intrinsic motives as more important than instrumental outcomes (like a pay rise and promotion).

3. Studies report that academics in economics are more inclined to maximize self-interest compared to their colleagues in humanities, social and natural sciences (Frank *et al.* 1993). Presumably, business and management people often have a similar orientation as their colleagues in economics.

References

Alvesson, M. (2013), *The Triumph of Emptiness. The Social Limits of Grandiosity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Alvesson, M. and Gabriel, Y. (2013), "Beyond formulaic research. In praise of greater diversity in organizational research and publications", *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 245-263.

Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2004), "Interfaces of control. Technocratic and socio-ideological control in a management consultancy firm", *Accounting, Organization & Society*, Vol. 29 Nos 3-4, pp. 423-444.

Alvesson, M. and Sandberg, J. (2013), *Constructing Research Questions. Doing Interesting Research*, Sage, London.

Alvesson, M. and Spicer, A. (2012), "A stupidity based theory of the organization", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 49 No. 7, pp. 1194-1220.

Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (2002), "Producing the appropriate individual. Identity regulation as organizational control", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 39 No. 5, pp. 619-644.

Barker, J. (1993), "Tightening the iron cage: concertive control in self-managing teams", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 408-437.

Bartunek, J.M., Rynes, S.L. and Ireland, D.R. (2006), "What makes management research interesting, and why does it matter?", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 49 No. 1, pp. 9-15.

Butler, N. and Spoelstra, S. (2012), "Your excellency", *Organization*, Vol. 19 No. 6, pp. 891-903.

Clark, T. and Wright, M. (2009), "So farewell then […] reflections on editing the Journal of Management Studies", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 1-9.

Clarke, C. and Knights, D. (2014), "A bitter sweet symphony, this life: Fragile academic selves and insecure identities at work", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 35 No. 3, pp. 335-357.

Clarke, C., Knights, D. and Jarvis, C. (2012), "A labour of love? Academics in business schools", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 5-15.

Collini, S. (2012), *What are Universities For?*, Penguin, London.

Fleming, P. and Spicer, A. (2003), "Working at a cynical distance: implications for power, subjectivity and resistance", *Organization*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 157-179.

Fleming, P. and Spicer, A. (2007), *Contesting the Corporation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Foley, M. (2010), *The Age of Absurdity*, Simon & Schuster, London.

Frank, R., Gulovich, T. and Regan, T. (1993), "Does studying economics inhibit cooperation?", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 159-171.

Gabriel, Y. (2005), "Class cages and glass palaces: images of organizations in image-conscious times", *Organization*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 9-27.

Gabriel, Y. (2010), "Organization studies: a space for ideas, identities and agonies", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 757-775.

Ginsberg, B. (2012), *The Fall of the Faculty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Graeber, D. (2015), *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, Melville House, London.

Grey, C. (2010), "Organizing studies: publications, politics and polemic", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 677-694.

Hardy, C. (1994), "Power and politics in organizations", *Managing Strategic Action*, Sage, London.

Jump, P. (2015), "Academics in the minority at more than two-thirds of UK universities", *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 3 September.

Kunda, G. (1992), *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.

Løwendahl, B. (1997), *Strategic Management in Professional Service Firms*, Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen.

Macdonald, S. and Kam, J. (2011), "The skewed few: people and papers of quality in management studies", *Organization*, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 467-475.

McSweeney, B. (2006), "Do we live in a post-bureaucratic Époque?", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 22-37.

Magala, S. (2009), *The Management of Meaning in Organizations*, Palgrave, London.

Meyer, J. and Rowan, B. (1977), "Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 83 No. 2, pp. 340-363.

Parker, M. (2014), "University, Ltd: changing a business school", *Organization*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 281-292.

Salancik, G.R. and Pfeffer, J. (1978), "A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 23, pp. 224-253.

Sauder, M. and Espeland, W.E. (2009), "The discipline of rankings. Tight coupling and organizational change", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 74 No. 1, pp. 63-82.

Sievers, B. (1986), "Beyond the surrogate of motivation", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 335-351.

Further reading

Adler, N. and Hansen, H. (2012), "Daring to care: scholarship that supports the courage of our convictions", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 128-139.

Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2011), *Qualitative Research and Theory Development*, Sage, London.

Arum, R. and Roksa, J. (2011), *Academically Adrift. Limited Learning and College Campuses*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Collinson, D. (2003), "Identities and insecurities", *Organization*, Vol. 10 No. 3, pp. 527-547.

Courpasson, D. (2013), "On the erosion of 'passionate scholarship'", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 34 No. 9, pp. 1243-1249.

Ginsberg, B. (2011), *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All Administrative University and Why It Matters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Jackall, R. (1988), *Moral Mazes*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Lukes, S. (1978), "Authority and power", in Bottomore, T. and Nisbet, R. (Eds), *A History of Sociological Analysis*, Heinemann, London, pp. 633-676.

Pearce, J. and Huang, L. (2012), "The decreasing value of management research for management education", *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 247-262.

Piereson, J. (2011), "What is wrong with our universities?", *The New Criterion*, Vol. 30, September, pp. 17-25.

Willmott, H. (2011), "Journal list fetishism and the perversion of scholarship: reactivity and the ABS list", *Organization*, Vol. 18 No. 4, pp. 429-442.

Corresponding author
Mats Alvesson can be contacted at: mats.alvesson@fek.lu.se

This article has been cited by:

1. Senia Kalfa, Lucy Taksa. 2016. Employability, managerialism, and performativity in higher education: a relational perspective. *Higher Education* . [CrossRef]
2. Joanne Meehan, Anne Touboulic, Helen Walker. 2016. Time to get real: The case for critical action research in purchasing and supply management. *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management* . [CrossRef]