

## Governmentality and internalised pressures of efficiency within the tenure track

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### Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### Abstract

Like many European universities, Finnish universities have adopted the tenure-track career model, which has significant implications for the dynamics of academic careers and the nature of academic work. In this paper, we use Foucault's theories of governmentality and biopolitics to analyse how professors on the tenure track have internalised pressures to be efficient, which affect not only their work but also their personal lives. Our data consist of open-ended responses to a survey of 270 tenure-track professors working in Finnish universities, in which we asked about their experiences of the tenure-track system and their well-being at work. Preliminary findings suggest that performance criteria and university expectations affect the work and personal lives of tenure-track professors in many governmental ways.

### Full paper

### Introduction

University academic career structures and human resource management (HRM) policies have undergone substantial changes in the last decade. Universities have changed to become more like 'real' organisations (Seeber et al., 2015), rather than learning communities and institutions (Välimaa, 2022); they have converged with private sector organisations in many ways. New Public Management (NPM), which aims to make public organisations work more efficiently, and managerialism, which emphasises the role of managers and increases their control over their staff, have affected the monitoring and evaluation of academic work (Kallio et al., 2015; Kezar et al., 2019; Siekkinen et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2023). Finnish universities have adopted the tenure track career model. This model aims, among other things, to increase control over academic work and to attract 'top' (especially international) researchers, as the tenure track is used in universities worldwide (Siekkinen et al., 2024).

The tenure track is linked to both neoliberal and meritocratic ideas about universities (Siekkinen et al., 2024). Twenty years ago, Ylijoki and Aittola (2005) noted the need to analyze the nature of academic work in part to understand the direction of academic work and in part to inform new, more desirable forms of work. The tenure track has become a major direction of academic work. It must also be understood as a more desirable form of academic work to the configuration of power that produced it. We use theories of governmentality here toward the same goals of Ylijoki and Aittola: to understand this now-new direction of academic work, and to open, if needed, more desirable futures.

## Theory

Michel Foucault's governmentality analyses how individuals make and are made through social controls, specifically forces characterized by economic logic applied directly to a population (Foucault, 1977/2007; see also biopolitics, Foucault, 1976/1990).

Governmentality is bound up with the NPM technocratic state, including higher education (Cannizzo, 2015; Koski, 1990, 2009; Kuntz, 2019). Key to theories of governmentality is the operation of force without a clearly identifiable cause. A governmental analysis of the operation of power in shaping the Finnish tenure track will not find a single actor (manager, ministry, etc.) as prime mover. There is no boogeyman operating the forces that constrain us, and we look for one to our own analytical detriment (Foucault, 1976/1990). The economic logic of governmentality, if and where it exists, is the nonsubjective force that makes itself the unquestioned common sense of life within the tenure track career model.

## Data and Method

The data in this paper was collected via a survey sent to Finnish professors on the tenure track career path from all disciplinary fields in autumn 2023. In this paper, we analyse three open-ended questions relating to the experiences of communication and information sharing, performance evaluation, and well-being among tenure-track professors.

To investigate governmentality within the Finnish tenure track professoriate, we begin with the statements of tenure track professors. Our method looks for Foucault's components of governmentality: "institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics" (Foucault, 1977/2007, p. 108). Governmentality is the overall effect that emerges from the composition of components we are looking for; since it cannot be understood as a sum or through another algorithm, there is no methodological formula possible to determine its shape (Foucault, 1976/1990). Our analysis identifies these five components of governmentality in respondents' statements, and from there makes an educated leap to our final conclusions (Kuntz, 2019).

## Results and Conclusion

Preliminary results suggest that tenure track professors are affected by governmental pressures in their professional and personal lives. The tenure track produces calculations

and tactics within faculty, particularly in relation to the specific datafication of their evaluation that defines this career path. The evaluation itself, especially when promoted as holistic, creates subjects who are better or worse off in relation to their ease with criteria that are definitionally vague and high stakes. These criteria are repeatedly described as “arbitrary” and the evaluation process as happening in a “black box” wherein “anything and everything may be evaluated.” These sentiments were shared even among respondents who agreed with this arbitrariness. This uncertainty, on the whole, produced affects of disaster, unease, frustration, and humiliation.

This snapshot of analysis points to the operation of governmentality within academic work. Analysis continues across the other components of governmentality, as well as broadly into discursive practices respondents note that do not neatly fit prior theorizations of governmentality. This work will intervene both in conversations about innovations in academic work as well as about the modern, locally-specific shape of governmentality and biopolitics.