

**Serial number** 0141

**Title** 'Critical Corridor Talk': Just Gossip or Hidden Moral Resistance to Managerialism? The Negative Capability of Distributed Higher Education Leadership

**Submitter** Prof. Jill Jameson

## **'Critical Corridor Talk': Just Gossip or Hidden Moral Resistance to Managerialism? The Negative Capability of Distributed Higher Education Leadership**

### **Abstract**

This theoretical paper argues that relatively invisible forms of moral resistance in neo-collegial distributed leadership are progressively challenging managerial instrumentalism in a stratified UK higher education system. The theoretical model of 'critical corridor talk', informed by trust and leadership data and auto-ethnographic observations (2005-16), argues that resistant academic critique is gradually questioning new public management style economically-driven 'command and control' authoritarianism. The model builds on Barnett's concept of 'critical being' (1997) to consider whether academic staff find relief sharing 'critical corridor talk' in a distributed leadership framework of self-determined accountability. The highly functioning criticality of 'negative capability' encapsulates self-reflexive resistance against the 'false necessity' of supposedly deterministic imperatives of neoliberalist economic audit-based rationality. Yet to foster trust, such leadership needs to ensure it is practising correct moral principles itself when resisting the necessitarian manufactured performativity of higher education environments in which some in power overstep acceptable roles of good management.

### **Introduction**

The philosophical disposition to endure difficulties skilfully by remaining ethically steadfast against adversity in times of oppression may be termed 'stoicism', though it may have other names and descriptors. It is a quality intriguingly hard to pin down, as its depth of resilient character may remain largely unseen, arguably too elusive to be captured in empirical observation. This paper argues for the existence of a form of shared stoicism in the tacit knowledge of quiet 'corridor talk', hidden underneath the iceberg of what officially 'happens' in higher education. Hence this paper puts forward a theoretical philosophical model, albeit overtly informed by prior literature on resistance (Lucas, 2014), criticality (Barnet, 1987) managerialism and performativity (Ball, 2003; Deem, 1998; Leathwood and Read, 2013; McNay, 2005; Slaughter and Leslie 1997), and, less obviously, by empirical data and auto-ethnographic reflections on leadership (2005-16, including surveys 2008-17).

### **'Homo economicus' and moral hazard: managerialism through quantitative measures**

It seems clear that higher education management through hierarchically-dominated power relations, legitimised by quantitative measures to serve '*homo economicus*' (Thaler, 2000), is here to stay in UK higher education, at least for the present, as captured in strategic management targets, key performance indicators, metrics and learning analytics dashboards.

Going against the grain in challenging this trend, however, many researchers have pointed out that various forms of resistance to managerialism may offer the kinds of subtle, complex responses that this paper argues are a form of emerging moral resistance provided by critical academic leadership (Bacon, 2014; Gill, 2009; Leathwood and Read, 2009).

As part of this trend, the ‘neoliberal logics’ of questionable managerial behaviour involving controlling, bullying and performance monitoring, thinly justified by economic rationalism, have been critiqued in extensive prior literature on managerialism, neoliberalism and new public management. This analysis has identified a drive towards the deprofessionalisation of academic staff for around three decades now (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Deem, 1998; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Lea, 2011; McNay, 2005), putting forward variable models of collective leadership (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008) and collegiality (Elton, 2008; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2000; Bacon, 2014), sometimes as dichotomous alternatives (Tight, 2014) or as a form of contestation against an audit culture (Leathwood and Read, 2012). A seemingly fragile desperation emerges from related research regarding the marginalisation, disempowerment and ‘performativity’ stressors academics now face, in which a combined ‘punishing intensification of work’ and excessive governmentality of self-monitoring has, some cases, rendered academic labour increasingly precarious (Gill, 2009). This is exacerbated for groups already marginalised in relation to, for example, issues of gender, ethnicity and class status. In blind corporate trust of a ‘managerial template... [that].. has become the normative model of the university..’, Lea identifies a potentially risky decline in critical academic oversight of the functions of corporate university management, with a concomitant increase in ‘moral hazard’ (*ibid.*).

### **Moral Resistance and Negative Capability**

In this context, the current paper arose from the research question: *‘how and why do academic staff talk to each other to support survival from experiences of poor management in higher education? Is this just gossip?’* This issue emerged spontaneously from data analysis and informal discussions observed over many years at gatherings involving academics from across the UK. These conversations were broadly classifiable as ‘critical corridor talk’. This persistent counterdiscourse (Leach, 1997), with its concomitant tensions, seemed to involve many institutions, including management, academic and support staff. It echoed prior auto-ethnographic experiences from two decades of research and professional experience of higher education and was observed to occur in many different institutions at various levels.

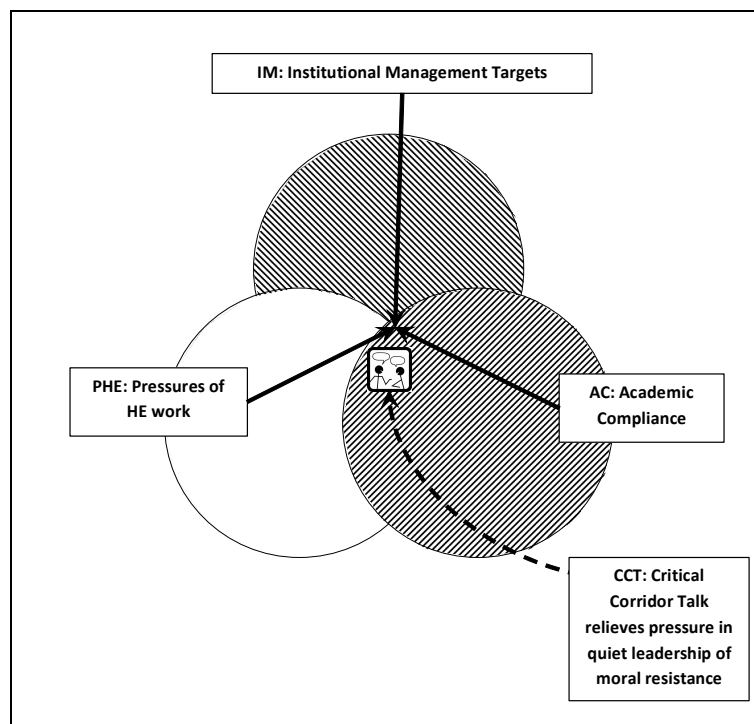
Such corridor talk was resistant to formal data collection and analysis, however, since as soon as one tried to pin it down through measurement, the phenomenon seemed to disappear. Such elusive informal counterdiscourse emerged as a form of ‘letting off steam’ in resistance to incessant metrics, scrutiny, and the governmentality of performative self-monitoring (Ball, 2003; Foucault, 1991; Leathwood and Read, 2009). Therefore, there was a need to capture the ambiguity and subtlety of ‘corridor talk’ through surveys and interviews where possible, and, where not, to reflect on what might be happening in these exchanges.

Building on prior definitions of ‘negative capability’ as non-formulaic responsiveness to uncertainty in collective academic leadership (Unger, 2007; Jameson, 2012; 2014), this paper reflects on the space for moral resistance that may be involved in this hidden, arguably ‘serious gossip’ commentary (Curren, 2008; Leach, *ibid.*). Stoical ‘negative capability’ seems to withstand difficulties by balancing uncertainties with selective action, while continuing

pragmatically to serve common purposes. When appropriately practised, it appeared to be a disciplined, finely balanced capability to resist an impetuous rush either to impose a ‘false necessity’ via unnecessarily destructive changes or to resist all new initiatives.

Therefore, the paper asserts that this functioning of critical moral resistance in higher education may be observable more through an *absence* of overt retaliatory behaviours than through any particularly discernible presence. In ‘corridor talk’, it is argued, a form of quiet alternative leadership may be operating that is to an extent deliberately unseen, may never be seen, and is arguably unknowable in its entirety. Reflecting on the literature on hidden cultures, corridor talk and silence (Leach, 1997; Gill, 2009), this paper argues that distributed neo-collegial leadership, in its more effective manifestations, may operate almost invisibly, as Lao Tse allegedly asserted c. 4th BC regarding the most effective form of leadership: ‘as for the best leaders, the people do not know of their existence.’ Such informal leadership escapes reductively diminutive ‘branding’ via quantifiable metrics in the academy of knowledge.

Operating, therefore, in many ways underground, this kind of ‘hiding of the light’ of critical being in the quiet corridor talk of moral resistance upholds ethical values in stoical internal determination against those that would capture and destroy it. On the surface, such leadership ‘plays the game’ of minimal strategic compliance sufficiently well to survive and even thrive (Leathwood and Read, 2013), without compromising its integrity, negotiating sensible outcomes for the common good. Its proponents share resistant strategies about ‘managing upwards’ and ‘acting always as the adult’ in their relationships with managers. They do this as a survival mechanism at a time of generalised uncertainty within the management of - and overtly adversarial power struggles within - organisational environments. This response shapes itself in reaction to questionable behaviours amongst some managers in authority. Yet, even in such circumstances, those practising informal distributed leadership within such ‘corridor talk’ recognise a need for discerningly ethical self-scrutiny to avoid carelessly inappropriate over-reactions to authority from instinctively defiant subordinate positions.



## **Figure 1: Critical Corridor Talk: Informal Distributed Leadership in Higher Education**

*Figure 1* demonstrates a theoretical model of the pressures that underpin 'critical corridor talk'. Institutional management (IM) has key targets or other demands necessary for institutional success. Academic staff are required to comply (AC) with target achievement, but intensifying pressures in the environment (PHE) mean tension is built up, for which there is no formal release, given compliance (AC) and monitoring by both self and IM. Therefore, CCT emerges as a pressure release: an escape valve. The problem is that, while IM possess positional authority and resources to operate status-driven power, they are in some cases not acting as leaders but as transactional managers, with little staff awareness or empathy. By contrast, leadership influence is sometimes demonstrated more by lower level staff, who receive no high status recognition or pay, but instead are subjected to negative criticism, control and scrutiny by managers who, ironically, are also dependent on such staff to achieve institutional targets. Both managers and staff seem locked into an highly stressful pattern.

### **Conclusion**

In other words, a rather strange situation may be going on in some institutions. While managers are overtly in charge, collective informal leadership amongst some highly-functioning academics exerts hidden influence, 'upwards managing the managers' behind the scenes. The ways in which this occurs is not particularly visible anywhere, never being formally discussed, yet many, at various levels, seem to be aware of it, through secret critical corridor talk. These conversations, exchanged amongst the mutually wounded, are about survival: academics swap stories of the good or bad, latest developments and tactics. The secret knowledge transmitted does not officially exist in the organisation, although anecdotally is recognised as instrumental in academic success, failure, survival and change.

'Negative capability' is a stoic capacity (Curren, 2008) to withstand difficulties in balancing uncertainties, underpinning the tacit knowledge and moral support for resistance shared between academics that is crucial for survival. Through the secret language of survival talk, not just gossip, shared with colleagues in corridor chats, important understandings are aired and swapped. Further auto-ethnographic research may capture the ambiguous, subtle dynamics at play when 'critical corridor talk' emerges to help academics cope with increasing pressures. The informal leadership involved needs, however, to engage also with self-critical monitoring, observing ethical principles itself to foster trust when resisting the apparently manufactured performativity of some higher education environments in which some – hopefully a minority – of those in power overstep acceptable roles of good management.

### **References**

- Bacon, Edwin (2014) *Neo-collegiality: restoring academic engagement in the managerial university*. London: The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.
- Barnett, R. (1997) *Higher Education: A Critical Business*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press.

Ball, S.J. 2003. The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18, 2: 215–28.

Bolden, R., Petrov, G., and Gosling, J. (2008) *Developing collective leadership in higher education*. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Clarke, J. and Newman, J. (1997) *The managerial state: power, politics and ideology in the remaking of social welfare*, London: Sage.

Curren, R. (Ed.). (2008) *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*. Blackwell Companions to Philosophy. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Daza, S.L. 2012. Complicity as infiltration: The (im)possibilities of research with/in NSF engineering grants in the age of neoliberal scientism. *Qualitative Inquiry* 18, no. 9: 773–86.

Deem, R. (1998) New Managerialism in Higher Education: the Management of Performances and Cultures in Universities. *International Studies in the Sociology of Education*, 8(1):47-70.

Deem, R. and Brehony, K. J. (2005) Management as Ideology: the Case of 'New Managerialism' in Higher Education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 31 (2), pp. 217–235.

Elton, L. (2008) Collegiality and Complexity: Humboldt's Relevance to British Universities Today. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62: 224–236.

Foucault, M. (1991) *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gill, R (2009) Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia in Flood, R. & Gill, R. (Eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*. London: Routledge

Hazelkorn, E. (2015) *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Henkel, M. 1997. Shifting boundaries and the academic profession. In *Key challenges to the academic profession*, ed. M. Kogan and U. Teichler, 191–204. Paris and Kassel: UNESCO Forum on Higher Education Research and Knowledge and the International Centre for Higher Education Research Kassel, INCHER-Kassel. [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/files/54977/11970234265Key\\_Challenges\\_Academic\\_Profession\\_REV.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/files/54977/11970234265Key_Challenges_Academic_Profession_REV.pdf)  
[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/files/54977/11970234265Key\\_Challenges\\_Academic\\_Profession\\_REV.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/files/54977/11970234265Key_Challenges_Academic_Profession_REV.pdf)

Hickman, G. R. and Sorenson, G. J. (2013). *The Power of Invisible Leadership: How a Compelling Common Purpose Inspires Exceptional Leadership* (pp. 2-3). London: Sage.

Jameson, J. (2012) Leadership values, trust and negative capability: Managing the uncertainties of future English higher education. *Higher education quarterly*, 66(4): 391-414.

Jameson, J. (2008) *Leadership: Professional Communities of Leadership Practice in Post-Compulsory Education*. Stirling University: ESCalate: Discussions in Education Series, The Higher Education Subject Centre for Education.

- Lea, D. R. (2011) The managerial university and the decline of modern thought. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43(8): 816-837.
- Leach, M. (1997). Feminist figurations: gossip as a counter discourse. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10(3), 305-314.
- Leathwood, C. and Read, B. (2013) Research policy and academic performativity: compliance, contestation and complicity, *Studies in Higher Education*, 38:8: 1162-1174
- Lucas, L. (2014) Academic resistance to quality assurance processes in higher education in the UK. *Policy and Society*, 33, 3
- McKenzie, T. (2000) Supercomplexity and the need for a practice and scholarship of self-reflexiveness in university research and teaching. *Staff and Educational Development International*, 4(3): 205-216.
- McNay, I. (2005) Managing Institutions in a Mass HE System. In I. McNay (ed.), *Beyond Mass Higher Education: Building on Experience*. Maidenhead: SRHE/Open University Press.
- Marginson, S. (2011) Higher education and public good. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(4): 411-433.
- Parr, C. (2013) "THE Best University Workplace Survey: staff unheard?" *Times Higher Education*, 15 August.
- Simpson, P. and French, R. (2006) Negative Capability and the Capacity to Think in the Present Moment: Some Implications for Leadership Practice. *Leadership*, 2 (2): 245–255.
- Simpson, P., French, R. and Harvey, C. (2002) Leadership and Negative Capability. *Human Relations*, 55 (10): 1209–1226.
- Slaughter, S., and Leslie, L. (1997) *Academic capitalism: Politics, policies and the entrepreneurial university*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Tapper, T. and Palfreyman, D. (2002) Understanding collegiality: The changing Oxbridge model. *Tertiary Education & Management*, 8 (1): 47-63.
- Thaler, R. H. (2000) From homo economicus to homo sapiens. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 14(1), 133-141.
- Thornton, M. (2009) Academic un-freedom in the new knowledge economy. In *Academic research and researchers*, ed. A. Brew and L. Lucas, 19–34. Maidenhead: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Tight, M. (2014) Collegiality and managerialism: a false dichotomy? Evidence from the higher education literature. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 20(4): 294-306.

Unger, R. M. (2007) *The self awakened: Pragmatism unbound*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.