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Time and shame in the neoliberal academy

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Abstract: Amid growing studies of time in higher education, few have theorized the interconnections between affect, academic work, and temporality—the way we make sense of and relate to time changes—in the neoliberal academy. By interconnecting temporality with shame, this article presents a critique of dominant temporalities of neoliberal higher education by exploring the differing existential temporalities associated with academic work. It presents and teases out the various manifestations of a dominant ‘temporality mirror’ and its relationship with affect. It argues that academic life’s temporality mirror is embedded in shame logics (i.e. ‘Being for others’). Such shame logics manifest through various temporal dimensions such as: a) temporal norms, b) future selves, and c) the future of others. This article proposes a set of questions that may open the possibility of delinking from the dominant temporality mirror and concludes with implications for academic subjectivity, higher education institutions, and higher education policy.

Paper: This conceptual paper presents a critique of the dominant temporalities of neoliberal higher education, by interconnecting the question of temporality with shame in academic work. Drawing on the recent ‘global’ literature on temporality and academic life (Gibbs et al. 2015; Vostal 2016; Ylijoki and Mäntylä 2003) and recent shame literature (e.g. Guenther 2011; Ahmed 2004; Walker 2017), I explore the differing temporalities within the neoliberal university subjecting academic workers to various forms of vulnerabilities (material, psychological and/or physical). I argue that temporalities of academic life are embedded in shame logics within the neoliberal academy. Such shame logics manifest through various temporal dimensions such as: a) temporal norms, b) future selves, and c) the future of others.

Shame refers to a way of *knowing/being* when one feels ‘out of place, judged by others as unworthy, unwanted or wrong—not only in a particular action but in one’s very existence’ (Guenther 2011, 24).

Shame logics operate through a culture of exposure (i.e. one feeling exposed) and/or culture of concealment (i.e. hiding oneself) (Ahmed 2004)—which ultimately leads one to become ‘Being for others’. Linked with normalization and social exclusion, shame logics manifests in three major ways, 1) social shame (What will people think), 2) Existential shame (I am worthless), and 3) Competence shame (I cannot do what I should be able to do) (Walker 2017). Shame is heterogeneously experienced (due to race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, language, citizenship, and so on). As I will demonstrate, the temporality acts as a mirror that reconstitutes and reproduces ‘Being for others’. This mirror acts both a) as an external thing (i.e. external object of reflection triggering self-evaluation) and b) internal way of knowing/being (i.e. internal node of existential/embodied self-evaluation). We draw on this temporality mirror to make sense of ourselves, articulate time, and experience time, which in turn triggers various forms of negative affect (including positive for some), particularly shame.

Often related to clock time (e.g. scheduled time, contract time, project time), structured temporal constraints become *temporal norms*, shaping ways of knowing/being (Ylijoki and Mäntylä, 2003; Gibbs et al. 2015). Temporal constraints results in one’s locus of being displaced, and thus ‘exist for Others’ (institutions, family, workplace, etc.). While the temporality mirror acts an ‘external thing’ via temporal norms (i.e. Gaze of the Other)—triggering feelings of exposure—the mirror’s power lies in becoming an internal way of knowing/being tied to exposure, exclusion, and/or powerlessness. temporal norms become mirrors through which an academic views oneself, and as such feel exposed through the temporal ‘gaze of Other’, and in turn coerced to ‘exist for the Other’. Such shame logics find fertile ground and manifest precisely because academics individualize ‘struggles’ (Gill, 2017) in light of temporal norms and consider themselves incompetent, unworthy, and powerless, while applying the temporal ‘gaze of Other’ inwardly.

Being for others’ intensifies within constraining temporal conditions related to *future selves*. More specifically, anticipation of the future and concerns for future self become the temporal mirror (i.e. gaze of Other) through which academics govern themselves (and become ‘Being for others’). The obsession with future-selves makes perfect sense given the heightened precarity norm in the neoliberal academy (Gill 2017). This obsession (acting as a temporal constraint) is heterogeneously experienced in the neoliberal academy as intense stress based on gender, race, class, ability, citizenship, and academic rank (e.g. retiring vs. tenured vs. tenure-track vs. adjunct faculty vs. postdoc). Academics, particularly short-term academic laborers, compensate for future self concerns by engaging in anticipatory acceleration, and strive for more productivity (i.e. to package ourselves for the future), hoping to attain their ‘ideal future way of being’ and alleviate any present feelings of unworthiness or discomfort (with a cost!). Such emotions around imagined future states (i.e. unemployment, lack of material security) are not individually constructed, but rather are collective experiences colonized by a collective temporality mirror.

The concern for the ‘future of others’— the futurity of one’s students, program, institution, community, and/or family—is another temporal constraint operating in the neoliberal academy. Such a temporal constraint acts as part of the dominant temporality mirror and is driven by ethical shame—a form of shame operating through feeling responsible for others, whether we are implicated in the suffering of others (Guenther 2011). Emotional labor and future of others are interconnected among many academics, particularly concerning one’s students’ futurity. Serving students is racialized, classed, and gendered, when one considers relational and emotional labor (see Morley 2016).

Similarly, ethical shame vis-a-vis the temporality mirror is also bound to the future of colleagues (Acker 2012). Concerns about one's program and institution futurity are an important part of a temporality mirror in a neoliberal performativity culture. Such burden to increase institutional visibility is also carried by supervisors, chairs, and program administrators (Wheaton and Kezar 2019). Finally, the temporal concern for future of others, particularly one's family, is gendered, racialized and classed, when one considers relational and emotional labor.

While my analysis has focused on academics, temporality and shame logics, one can raise similar questions about the role of temporality and shame logics operating in other policy scales of neoliberal reform such as the institutional, nation-state, regional, and/or global levels. We can raise questions about how temporality and shame logics operate at such scales, such as: how does the temporality mirror vis-a-vis shame logics operate among higher education institutions, nations, and regions with respect to HE reform? How do institutions, nation-states engage with the temporality mirror of future self and temporal norms in the midst of global competition and geopolitics of knowledge? As such, we can tease out the similarities, differences, and interconnections between these policy scales, the associated temporality mirrors, and the role of shame logics across these scales.

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