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Sandra Ackner & Anne Wagner

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Feminist Scholars Working Around the Neoliberal University

Sandra Acker*
Department of Social Justice Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto
161 Evelyn Avenue
Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 1V6
*Corresponding author: Email: sandra.acker@utoronto.ca

Anne Wagner
Department of Child and Family Studies
Department of Social Work
Nipissing University
100 College Drive
North Bay, ON, Canada P1B 8L7
Email: annew@nipissingu.ca
Feminist scholars working around the neoliberal university

Sandra Acker and Anne Wagner

A considerable scholarship now describes the increasing neoliberalization of universities and the accompanying impacts on academic research and researchers. However, less attention has been devoted to issues of research project leadership, especially for academics with feminist commitments. This article reports results of a qualitative study of 12 senior academic women from six countries who are known for feminist research and explores how they pursue their projects in the context of contemporary changes and challenges. Rather than positioning faculty as passive participants, this study acknowledges their agency within institutional structures, albeit somewhat constrained. The results reveal the range of strategies employed by feminist researchers in various national contexts that enable them to maintain their critical focus despite increasing pressures to conform to neoliberal agendas.

Keywords: research, feminism, leadership, academic, neoliberal university

Globally, it is recognized that ‘changes in the governance and management of knowledge production are likely to have significant effects on the core processes of research universities. . . [and] profound implications for the work of academics’ (Leišytė and Dee 2012, 123). Many writers have recounted features of the contemporary university that influence research production, such as granting policies (Polster 2007), new managerialism (Deem 1998), impact agendas (Chubb and Watermeyer 2016; Colley 2013; Olssen 2016), ethical review procedures (Leahey and Montgomery 2011) and intensified accountability regimes (Sousa and Brennan 2014). Our own recent research on changing practices in universities in Ontario, Canada suggests that academics are struggling to adapt to new expectations for research accountability and
productivity (Acker and Webber 2016b). This article focuses on the experiences of individuals leading research projects in the social sciences. Depending on country convention, these individuals may be termed grant holders, directors, or principal, lead or chief investigators. Here we use our local term of principal investigators (PIs). The article considers dilemmas and strategies reported by an international group of 12 experienced researchers with feminist commitments as they acclimatize to the changing nature of contemporary neoliberal universities.

A distinction is sometimes made between research ‘leadership’ and research ‘management’, the former involving looking ahead and articulating a vision, the latter referring to the more technical or administrative aspects of directing a project (Browning, Thompson, and Dawson 2012; McAlpine 2016). In order to distinguish our participants, who are full-time academics, from project managers and administrators hired specifically for such roles, we prefer the terminology ‘research leaders’ or ‘research project leaders’ for PIs. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that any PI’s responsibilities will include some administrative and managerial aspects. Academic leadership of social science research projects is a neglected area for analysis (though see Kyvik 2013; Platt 1976).

In the section explaining our method, below, we expand on the process by which the participants were selected. When we refer to participants as feminist scholars, researchers or leaders or as holding feminist commitments, we mean that at least some of their academic work has been constructed through a feminist lens. They are not necessarily activists nor will all of their research be identified as feminist. Adding ‘feminist’ to ‘research leader’ allows us to consider whether research with a social justice focus – feminism in this case – may be at odds with contemporary conditions under which research is funded and carried out.
By creating a study in which research leaders are invited to reflect on their work and its context, we are making a contribution to what Brew and Lucas (2009, 7) call the ‘scholarship of academic research’. We ask three research questions within this article:

1. How does a selection of feminist research leaders understand contemporary changes in academic work?

2. Do the participants see these changes as impacting upon their feminist research and research leadership?

3. How do the participants respond to the challenges created by these changes?

**Conceptual framework**

In this section we review analyses of how academic work has changed in recent decades; the potential impact of such changes on feminist research leadership; and responses to these changes.

**Changing academic work**

The past several decades have seen an explosion of literature commenting, usually critically, on the implications of neoliberalism for university work. Higher education institutions are said to be operating on quasi-business principles in order to increase efficiency in the face of progressive under-funding by governments, thus becoming corporatized, marketized, entrepreneurial, managerial and so forth (e.g. Guzmán-Valenzuela and Di Napoli 2015; Martínez Alemán 2012). Academics must acquiesce to repeated measurements of their productivity (Morley 2016) within an audit culture (Shore and Wright 2000). Teaching is similarly subject to accounting through measures of student satisfaction (Shah and Sid Nair 2012). At the same time, the job security and expectations of academic freedom traditionally underlying university teaching and research are undermined by an increasing preference for hiring casual staff who have no guarantee of
permanent work (Blackmore 2014; Jones 2013). Coordinating all of these changes requires ‘new managerialism’, replete with a growing cadre of professional and academic administrators (Anderson 2008; Deem 1998).

Work expectations intensify even as resources are reduced (Leišytė and Dee 2012), while new technologies make it possible to render borders between work and non-work permeable (Gornall and Salisbury 2012; Ylijoki 2013). In some jurisdictions, such as the UK, accountability expectations are operationalized through national exercises that purport to assess quality and quantity of research, with significant consequences for university funding and for individual academic careers. Elsewhere there are similar exercises although details and sanctions vary and not all operate at national level (Leišytė and Dee 2012; McNay 2009).

Such changes and reforms will logically alter the context in which research is produced. Government and funding body priorities are frequently mentioned as shaping research possibilities (Brew and Lucas 2009). National variations matter, as they do for academic work more generally (Bentley and Kyvik 2012; McNay 2009). Research production is also influenced by the local social and institutional context in which it is embedded, including the regulatory environment (Acker and Webber, 2016a; Leahey and Montgomery 2011), disciplinary cultures (Becher and Trowler 2001; Leišytė, Enders, and de Boer 2009) and the dynamics of research teams (O’Connor, Rice, Peters, and Veryzer 2003; Platt 1976).

This literature leads us to ask what issues experienced academics face in their research pursuits, particularly when their topics contain a social justice impetus (a feminist or Indigenous commitment, for example) that might conflict with the prevailing neoliberal parameters stressing contributions to the economy, impact, competition and so forth (Asmar, Mercier, and Page 2009; Gonzales 2015).
**Feminist research leadership**

Scholarship on women and leadership in the academy typically applies to the hierarchy of positions within the university’s managerial structure (Blackmore 2014), not to research project leadership. As in the conventional literature, the structure of the university can be examined in order to analyze its amenability to women’s research leadership. Neoliberal emphases on accountability, competition, efficiency, individualism and managerialism are thought to deepen the disadvantages of women and ethnic minority academics in pursuing research, as well as those in small universities or in countries on the periphery (Angervall, Beach, and Gustafsson 2015; Curtis 2016; Leberman, Eames, and Barnett 2015; Murray, Morris, Lavoie, Leavitt, Maclsaac, Masson, and Villard 2016). Under neoliberalism, the range of what is considered acceptable research narrows (Olssen 2016), as governments shift resources towards large-scale research and research that promises an economic payoff, further disadvantaging humanists and social scientists, often women, whose interests lie elsewhere. Expensive full-time, permanent positions diminish, replaced by temporary and precarious research or teaching contracts, often held by women. As workload intensifies, boundaries between work and non-work blur (Ylijoki 2013), posing additional difficulties for academics with caring responsibilities (Grummell, Devine, and Lynch 2009), again often women. Service responsibilities continue to be held disproportionately by women, making it more difficult to devote sufficient time to research (Acker, Webber, and Smyth 2016). While overt discrimination has diminished, neoliberalism has provided an alternative, less obvious form of gender division, as institutions reward a stereotypically masculinist or macho way of operating (Thomas and Davies 2002), promoting toughness, boasting, individualism and competition, downplaying the emotional side of life (Leathwood and
Hey 2009) and overall creating what Morley (2016, 5) calls a ‘virility culture’ and Thornton (2013, 3) terms the ‘re-masculinisation of the university’.

This analysis raises questions of whether feminist approaches to research leadership might be especially difficult to incorporate into the new regime. Feminist preferences such as subverting hierarchy, challenging power, promoting egalitarianism and collaboration and incorporating an ethic of care (Mauthner and Edwards 2010) would seem to run counter to the ethos of neoliberal universities.

**Responses to change**

With – or perhaps because of – chronic reductions in funding (Brownlee 2016), academics are nevertheless expected to display an ever-rising record of grant-getting, project-managing, output-publishing and impact-demonstrating, often while also taking on a full complement of teaching and administration. Individuals with commitments to social justice objectives – such as feminism’s goal of making the world better for women – may be caught within structures for producing research that replicate traditional power relations that do little for women or persons from oppressed groups. For women academics, notions of ‘leadership’ can evoke risk and sacrifice rather than reward (Acker 2012, 2014; Morley and Crossouard 2016). Hierarchical structures breed resentment and beget suspicions that managers/leaders may be abusing their power, while their own managerial and emotion work goes unnoticed and unrecognized (Acker 2012; Mauthner and Edwards 2010).

Some writers have tried to counterbalance this pessimism by considering the extent to which academics resist pressures that arise from new managerialism or the audit culture (Shahjahan 2014). Overt resistance appears to be rare, while rule-following is evident in varying degree (Leathwood and Read 2013). Responses that are strategic rather than enthusiastic are
described as ‘adaptive strategies’ (McNay 2009), ‘professional pragmatism’ (Teelken 2011), ‘qualified compliance’ (Anderson 2008), ‘symbolic compliance’ (Leišytė et al. 2009) and ‘negotiation’ (Gonzales 2015). Several researchers emphasize the capacity of academics to display agency and resilience in responding to situational constraints (Gonzales 2015; McAlpine 2016). A few writers in the UK and Australia envision academics actively working to change the uncongenial circumstances around them, aiming for contestation (Leathwood and Read 2013) or moving ‘beyond dirges of despair’ (Kenway, Boden, and Fahey 2014).

Our challenge here is to introduce an element of agency into the discussion of research leadership under contemporary (and contradictory) conditions of academic life without overstating individual options. Anticipating that the feminist commitments of our participants might require them to engage in efforts to avoid backlash or other problems, we wonder if and how they manage to move beyond neoliberal university constraints.

The study

The idea for this study originated when the first author, Sandra, reflected back over her career and projects of the past. Thinking about ‘project leadership’, she wondered how decisions she had made influenced the progress and results of the research. Had her feminist commitments meant that too much emphasis was placed on fostering warm relationships among team members and not enough on accomplishing the required tasks in a timely fashion? Not many scholars had directly addressed these questions. As a result, she designed a pilot study to discover whether other PIs with a social justice orientation had similar or different leadership experiences.

Seventeen potential participants in seven countries were contacted, of which 12 eventually became part of the study. Participants were experienced women academics in education, sociology and allied fields who had significant publications and projects related to
gender and/or feminist issues. Individuals were chosen based on Sandra’s knowledge of established scholars in those fields who had adopted a feminist perspective in at least some of their prior research. Web sites were also consulted as a means of double-checking publication records. Most participants were full professors or equivalent; a few came from the next rank below. They were drawn from six countries: Australia (one), Canada (two), Finland (two), New Zealand (one), the United Kingdom (four) and the United States (two).

Participants were approached over email. Attached to the email were a consent letter and a set of nine questions. Requests were sent in May, 2015, and replies were received between May and August of 2015, apart from one additional interview that took place in January 2017. Participants were given the option of contacting the PI to inquire about alternative methods if they did not wish simply to send an email response, e.g. a Skype or in-person interview. Table 1 summarizes these details, using pseudonyms for participants’ names.

[Table 1 about here]

Questions were open-ended and asked participants to elaborate on their experiences as research leaders, including the type of work they do, typical research team structure, leadership style, feminist approaches, more and less successful aspects of projects and changes over time. (Given that some participants ‘wrote’ while others ‘talked’, we use ‘talk’ or ‘spoke’ throughout for convenience.) The number of questions was deliberately kept to a minimum in order to increase the response rate, anticipating the considerable workloads of those being invited to participate.
Skype or in-person interviews were taped and transcribed. Emailed responses ranged from two to six pages. Our approach is ‘interpretational qualitative analysis’ (Tesch 1990, 98), that is, an effort to discover meaning-oriented regularities in the data. While in some cases, ‘stories’ were provided about events and experiences that would qualify as narratives (Chase 2005, 652), overall we were not systematically collecting narratives or taking a narrative approach. Instead, we looked for themes for cross-case analysis, related to the literature, the questions asked and anything emergent but relevant. ‘Seeking funding’ is an example of an emergent theme.

Responses and transcripts were read and re-read and provisionally coded manually by the two authors. Once we had identified our key themes, we returned to the transcripts and coded selectively (Charmaz 2010, 188) for these themes. Working as a team of two on the analysis and writing was important for the study. Awareness of the potential impact of our own locations on the research is an important component of reflexivity, which is frequently associated with qualitative feminist research (McHugh 2014; Mountz 2002; Parr 2015). While Sandra knew many of the participants personally and conducted the data collection, including the five interviews, the second author, Anne, came fresh to the transcripts. While both of us are academics, this differential positioning added a reflexive element to the analysis, as themes and interpretations were decided upon through discussion and back and forth writing and editing.

**Findings**

Our results are organized according to the three research questions indicated earlier.

**Changing academic work**

Question 1 was ‘How does a group of feminist research leaders understand the contemporary changes in academic work?’ While only one question was asked directly about change,
references were found throughout the responses. As would be predicted by the literature (e.g. Brew and Lucas 2009; Raddon 2011; Schlesinger, Selfe, and Munro 2015; Ylijoki 2015), comments about the requirements to seek external research funding and the ways in which research funders’ preferences were shaping research were pervasive in the results. Also evident were negative feelings about academic accomplishments being too closely measured and accounted for and the competitive ethos that accompanied all of these reform measures.

*Funding and funding bodies*

Liisa explained that in the Finnish context, it is an expectation that all senior academics seek large external grants and coordinate large research teams, which tend to be favoured by funding bodies. Also in Finland, Johanna added that ‘applying for grants seems to be more and more central to all academics and takes more and more of their time’, while in the UK, Valerie pointed to the ‘necessity of having research funding to appear to be an active researcher’.

At the same time, it was reportedly becoming more difficult to be successful in competitive applications. Valerie referred to ‘the harsh policy and economic climate’ and Christine, also in the UK, stated that in her field, ‘the money has dried up’. Annette noted that ‘research funds in New Zealand are very limited’, while in Canada, Karen said that ‘the availability of funding for feminist research projects seems to be dwindling’ and Marcia lamented ‘oh, it’s impossible to get funding’. Additionally, Christine pointed out that:

Research projects are advertised with extremely short lead times. . . . I’m talking about four weeks, that kind of thing. There’s no time to conceptualize them, do the background reading and get the clearance from within the university. . . . [There’s] a higher level of expectation, a constrained, faster-moving period in which to construct these things, and sometimes you’re told at the last minute that you can’t put it in. And so you feel all the time that your personal investment is a bit wasted and unappreciated.
Liisa echoed Christine’s frustration: ‘and it needs to be added that not all of these applications [are] successful. It takes quite a lot of time and energy to write applications and build connections, and then these efforts tend to fade away in lack of funding’.

What seemed to disturb participants even more than the work of continually applying for funding was the sense that the funding bodies had excess power over what were acceptable topics and styles of research. Participants believed that they had to direct research projects into areas that government and policy makers would deem useful, adapting to meet policy shifts and whatever was considered a top priority (Blackmore 2014). Such strategies required highlighting measurable and expected outputs and adopting market based terminology, while simultaneously downplaying the significance of gender, race and other social justice issues:

What’s currently happening in Australia is that the Commonwealth Government is making it clear what are the ideological parameters of the sort of research they think is suitable. . . anything that is critical or anything on gay and lesbian whatever, anything that is considered ‘out there’ and not utilitarian [is thought to be inappropriate]. (Kathleen)

Teams

That grant-holders would be working in teams – often large, interdisciplinary and international – appeared to be an expectation of some funders (see also Mauthner and Doucet 2008). Annette stated that ‘in the culture around me [there is] more emphasis on team-based research because it’s easier to get funds for that kind of research’. Liisa elaborated:

The current demand of the Finnish higher education policy (and respectively, of our university institutions) is to establish big, multi-or interdisciplinary consortia which entail a variety of partners from different countries and sectors and which have clearly demonstrable societal relevance.
Participants highlighted the complexities of large teams, which were generally perceived as demanding and relatively unrewarding, a finding also reflected in the literature on the challenging dynamics of academic research teams (Malacrida 2007; Platt 1976; Rogers-Dillon 2005). In some contexts, research leaders did not have complete autonomy to decide who to include in their team, as they might not have appropriate higher degree students available (Karen) or be required to work with individuals from specific partner institutions (Suzanne) or with individuals already associated with a research unit (Isla). Having to work with someone uncongenial and without similar principles was no small hindrance, as Isla, one of the UK participants, emphasized:

In one of my projects I was given a male researcher who somebody else … dumped on me, and he wouldn’t do anything I would say. He wouldn’t even answer the emails, and in the end I had to go through a grievance procedures to have him removed . . . It was absolutely horrible and I nearly left academia as a result.

There were additional accounts of difficult research partnerships, including projects that were focused on the advancement of someone else’s career (Liisa, Isla); collaborators interested in grabbing the limelight (Valerie); and team members who refused to share access to the data (Christine, Liisa), lost interest, failed to do the work, retired or moved away (Marcia, Suzanne). These experiences could be damaging: ‘it was vile. It was absolutely vile on a daily basis’ (Christine). A few of these stories referred to ostensibly feminist colleagues who nevertheless thwarted participants’ intentions.

Those instances do not mean that teams were inevitably problematic. There are accounts in the literature of teams that worked well (McGinn, Shields, Manley-Casimir, Grundy, and Fenton 2005; Schlesinger et al. 2015; Siltanen, Willis, and Scobie 2008). Participants were often happy with their teams, especially when they were of a manageable size and were composed of
trusted colleagues and chosen researchers. Many of the women noted that establishing an egalitarian leadership style with the team was important to them and reflective of their feminist commitments.

*Accountability and individualism*

Participants – especially those in the UK – commented on the need to measure outcomes, show impact and publish results. As Valerie stated, ‘everything seems to have to be measured or it doesn’t exist’.

Suzanne noted that UK universities have become larger and more corporatized and engaged in ‘much, much more performance management of academic research . . . it’s not about the carrot, it’s about sticks. If you don’t achieve this, we will do that to you’. Suzanne also suggested that quality could be compromised by the prevailing over-emphasis on outputs. The women generally disliked the individualism and competitiveness that were built into the accountability mechanisms (Sousa and Brennan 2014, 67). Moreover, certain types of work were barely credited, including the enormous amount of unpaid and unacknowledged work that went into forming teams and submitting funding proposals (Herbert, Barnett, Clarke, and Graves 2013). This work tends to be rendered largely invisible in institutional performance assessments and metrics that only consider the value of grants, number of publications and impact of the work.

In what Ylijoki (2015) calls ‘project time’, the money can run out before the actual work is complete (Platt 1976), and team members may lose interest or move on to other positions. For example: ‘the co-PI took up a really busy leadership role not long into the project and I was left carrying the can for a lot of the work, especially the writing’ (Annette); ‘[colleague] retired and I took over the project at that point and I finished it’ (Marcia). The participants understood that
paid researchers would need to seek other jobs, whether or not the project was complete. As Isla commented: ‘I think [with] the whole neoliberal career patterns, people become quite selfish about what their needs are. I say ‘selfish’ but . . . sometimes it’s just survival. They have to move on’.

_Feminist research leadership_

To summarize our discussion so far, participants described pressures to secure external funding, combined with the need to satisfy funding bodies’ preferences or supposed preferences, as their main concern with changing university practices. Forms of accountability that oversimplified and over-measured accomplishments were also seen as an unpleasant feature of contemporary university life. These trends were regarded as resulting in a range of consequences, mostly negative. Although we have hinted that feminist researchers might dislike large teams and prefer certain types of collaborative practices, much of what we have reported could be said to relate to research leaders in general working under neoliberal conventions. We now turn to our second research question to explore the specific effects on feminist researchers: Do the participants see these changes as impacting upon their feminist research and research leadership?

_Feminist research_

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the ‘dizzying array’ (Mountz 2002, 189) of feminist research methods now in place. In general terms, feminist research is thought to put women and gender at the centre of analysis; to deconstruct unequal power relations (not limited to gender); to work towards the improvement of women’s lives; to value participant voices; to emphasize care and collectivity and de-emphasize hierarchy; and to acknowledge the situational nature of knowledge and the importance of researcher positionality and reflexivity (see, for example, Fonow and Cook 2005; McHugh 2014; Mountz 2002; Parr 2015; Siltanen et al. 2008).
Given the histories of the participants as feminist scholars, it might be expected that they continue to prize and prioritize feminist research. In some cases, that outcome was as predicted:

Yes, all [my] projects have been identified as explicitly feminist. Explicitly they address issues of equity, social justice and [specific topic] in the lives of girls and women. Implicitly, they are intended to be collaborative and participatory, and most employ qualitative, in-depth interviewing, gathering girls’ and women’s experiences from the points of view of participants themselves.

Analysis of the qualitative information draws on feminist theory. (Karen)

Karen’s response identifies the topic, the method and the theory as defining a feminist approach.

Valerie described her current research as ‘an education activist and feminist activist project’.

Margaret, in the United States, had a straightforward way of describing the feminist content of her work:

A large part of my research has dealt with the advancement of women’s conditions. It has been feminist in the sense that I had a political objective: namely, advancing the material conditions of women as well as challenging ideological orders that presume the superiority of men over women.

Johanna stated:

All of the funded projects have been at least implicitly feminist. Feminist methodological and theoretical perspectives have been used and I as well as the project participants have identified themselves as feminists. Gender has in all projects been one of the foci in sub-studies but not the only one, and always interlinked with other dimensions of difference.

Several women indicated that their projects were at least implicitly feminist because of their own identity as feminists: ‘Maybe it’s implicitly and explicitly [feminist] by the very nature that I’m involved in it’ (Isla); ‘the other [projects] were not feminist in an explicit sense … although, because I am a feminist, gender is always an issue I look out for in the data’ (Annette); [feminism is] more than a paradigm, it’s a whole perspective because I find I don’t do anything now without gendering and racializing, at the very least’ (Marcia). Another response was to label
certain projects feminist and others less so. Kathleen talked about having different strands in her work, as did Christine, while Suzanne pointed out that some projects were ‘opportunistic’, and therefore did not always foreground gender issues.

Whether or not a project had a feminist component or theme, there was hesitation about highlighting a feminist label when applying for funds. For example, ‘in project applications, I have not especially emphasized the feminist perspective’ (Johanna); ‘it depends on what you are trying to do, but also on what your assessment is of the likelihood of getting funded’ (Suzanne); ‘when you’re bidding for it, you’re not saying “this is a feminist project” ’ (Isla). In the United States, Diane spoke of her frustrating and failed efforts to get big funding: ‘[I am] pursuing research projects that challenge the status quo, so funders are not interested’.

**Feminist leadership**

Although there is very little literature on feminist research leadership, as noted earlier, there is a relevant literature on issues that arise in research teams. O’Connor et al. (2003) comment that the academic research team is ‘an extreme case of a team whose structure, legitimacy and work processes are highly uncertain’ (159). The product is ideas; deadlines are vague; incentives to cooperate dissipate when only the leader gets credit for success (159). Typical hierarchies involving a principal investigator and lower-status postgraduate students or contract researchers lead to a whole range of resentments and difficulties (Rogers-Dillon 2005). Importantly, if less dramatically, constructing collective interpretations in a team can be elusive (Acker 2000; Mauthner and Doucet 2008; Siltanen et al. 2008). In light of this literature, we questioned participants about their teams and the ways in which they chose to lead their projects. They were also invited to reflect on both their strengths and weaknesses as PIs.
A number of the participants discussed strengths related directly to management of a project or a team: putting together a good team, being alert to deadlines, maintaining relationships, taking responsibility. Others put more emphasis on qualities often associated with women or feminist leaders, such as being collaborative, respectful, inclusive, empowering and so on. Several women thought that they might be too task-focused or controlling; for example, Margaret indicated ‘I prefer to be more direct but my other team members have taught me to be more patient and less critical’. Others worried that they were not assertive enough: Marcia commented ruefully, ‘I don’t think I’m particularly strong as a project leader because I’m not a great judge of people’, while Kathleen admitted that ‘I let things drift for too long before saying something’ and Johanna regretted that she was not ‘clever and hard enough’ in negotiating better terms for colleagues without secure positions. The ambivalence here may be related to the difficulties found more generally for women academic leaders, as they navigate uneasily between being assertive and being feminine (Acker 2012, 2014; Priola 2007).

Johanna’s statement reflects the changing conditions of academic work, as she went on to describe how unhealthy competition arose when the university lost resources and academia ‘moved … into celebrating individual excellence instead of collaboration and solidarity’. The other participant from Finland, Liisa, with some irony, commented on her weaknesses as a research leader:

I think that I am not that good in competing, marketing, gaining visibility and thinking strategically about the pros and cons of collaboration with different partners. These are the kind of competences I think are helpful in the current highly competitive research environment.

Feminist commitments were evident in discussions of mentoring. Most of the women expressed determination to support and mentor junior colleagues and graduate students. These
efforts were often labour intensive and not necessarily acknowledged institutionally. Nonetheless, each viewed this activity as an integral part of her role as a senior academic.

In cases where they worked with others, most participants aimed for a collaborative leadership style that was congruent with feminist perspectives. For example, Liisa described a project where ‘the group worked very intensely and intimately together, including close supporting and mentoring the junior researchers’. Nevertheless, in line with the literature on academic teams, most also described projects where collaboration had been difficult. As Isla reflected, ‘there is this fantasy around feminist research that we can all work collaboratively, but people still have careers’. Isla sought to create ‘safe spaces’ for her research staff:

I think safe space is for Indigenous researchers, safe space is for ethnic minority researchers . . . you bring like minded people together to do like minded research . . . Whether it’s gender, race, culture, those things bind you together; we need that, because higher education is not a friendly place for you when you’re a minority of any sort.

The intensity and individualization of accountability, combined with the pressure to publish and secure grants in a competitive mode, was in tension with efforts to be kind, supportive, caring and collaborative. The research leaders tried to do everything well and it was stressful. Kathleen acknowledged that the physical and mental personal cost of leading research teams is ‘huge’. Isla described her efforts to enact a feminist leadership style, which she saw as involving ‘nurturing and listening and coaxing and being respectful’, as ‘exhausting’. It may be inferred that the increasing expectations for entrepreneurship and productivity, combined with modes of research production that encourage individual research workers to prioritize career moves over extended collaboration, may contribute to some of the challenges associated with implementing feminist ideals or even democratic practices more generally (Platt 1976). Liisa recounted an anecdote that spoke to the ‘virility culture’ (Morley 2016) mentioned earlier:
A couple of days ago I was in a meeting where one male colleague told [the group] that he is involved in a research application of 7 million Euros, and then another colleague replied that he is a coordinator of an application of 8 million Euros. I saw the funny side of this male competition, but also felt myself a bit of an outsider . . . research talk [should be] about exciting ideas and new questions.

Responses to change

In this section we consider our third research question: How do the participants respond to the challenges created by these changes? Beyond the ways in which participants made efforts to conform (get the grants, do the publishing) and at the same time put into effect feminist interests, commitments and leadership styles, we want to consider how they use agency in achieving excellence, yet staying true to their beliefs.

While up to this point, we have stressed the negative consequences of conforming to the harsher side of new academe, here we also want to include the positives. First, these women are succeeding because they enjoy their work (Acker, Haque and Webber 2016; Gornall and Salisbury 2012). Valerie referred to a project as ‘a lot of fun’. Even after reporting a series of frustrations, Christine said ‘but we’re still doing it, all of us . . . because there’s a natural interest in being nosy about things. I like doing research and I like doing it with people’. Like Christine, the others also believe in what they are doing. They are also good at it. Several had received prestigious fellowships that allowed teaching buy-outs or travel or extra research funding.

Second, as experienced scholars, they have gradually figured out how to play the game (Lucas 2006) or less cynically, how to satisfy external requirements while maintaining their feminist commitments. Through experience, they have learned project management skills: ‘really, really careful selection [of team members] and then a very planned, visible set of processes so that people are seen to and have to engage with regular milestones, dates and
expectations and presentations and all of that’ (Christine). Another example comes from discussions of how they form research teams or accept invitations from others to join teams. There was near unanimous agreement among the participants that relying on friendship and collegial networks was the best strategy for building a cohesive team. Not only did such an approach help to ensure that the team would share a vision and hold common values but it was also perceived as a means of minimizing interpersonal conflicts and increasing the likelihood of genuine collaboration and enjoyment. For example, Johanna described a close-knit research group that grew over time as new doctoral students came under the umbrella, and over time, the students of the (former) doctoral students joined as well. Similarly, some of the women described long-standing and even heartfelt collaborations with their research staff: ‘in terms of employing people, I have been really fortunate and I’ve had some superb women who I have worked with for a long time’ (Kathleen). At the same time, the participants also noted that teams should include people with different strengths ‘in order to avoid “group think” ’ (Liisa) and ‘to bring something different to the project’ (Kathleen).

Third – a surprise to us – was what we came to call do-it-yourself research. Despite all the pressures toward collaborations and large teams, some of the participants simply continued to do their own work in their own way. Margaret exemplified this approach, explaining:

> Except for the current project... I have always funded my own research. This has given me enormous freedom in selecting research topics, taking specific positions, and using a variety of outlets for diffusion of research findings.

> We think we were surprised because of the domination of ‘projectification’ (Ylijoki 2015) in our own minds. Upon further thought, it did not seem that unreasonable that a well-paid academic might choose to use her own resources in this way, although this means of supporting research might not be viable for others who are newer or less secure. Marcia, who had used
personal funds to complete a project once a colleague ‘blew the funds’, was happy with the result but unsure whether she would do the same again: ‘When you think of what $100,000 could have done for one of my kids, I don’t really think that I owe the world that much’.

We noticed other examples of participants who were funding their own research or relying on small amounts of institutional funding. Christine described enjoying working with a team of six scholars drawn from different countries doing an unfunded project. ‘I made a decision a few years ago that if I wanted to do it, I would get on with it, and it was very unlikely that there would be any money’. She added that it could pay off in a more conventional way: ‘sometimes the fact that you’ve done it means that when you go to bid for the money that does turn up, you have more credibility’. Even people who had done large amounts of funded research could cite some unfunded or minimally funded work ‘on the side’, often noting that it actually had high quality or impact or brought them pleasure.

Fourth, there were examples of what we call a ‘workaround’, using the information technology term for finding a different way to do something when the conventional one does not work. Diane was our leading case. Thwarted by the unfriendly funding landscape in her field in the US, she found clever ways to do her research anyway. She spoke of ‘embedding’ her research in funded projects run by others, with freedom to (re)define her ‘tiny piece’, and of conceptualizing other projects so that graduate students could do their dissertations as part of the research. Much of the time she did not have independent funding, but she nevertheless believed that good work resulted from her efforts. Other examples included folding unfunded projects into research centre operations (Christine) or finding a new person to write up research once a collaborator had moved away (Kathleen).
In these ways, researchers exerted agency and showed resilience while maintaining an understanding based on structural constraints. ‘Workaround’ resembles what are referred to as ‘adaptive strategies’ (McNay 2009), ‘symbolic compliance’ (Leišytė et al. 2009) and other phrases mentioned earlier. However, what stands out to us is the sheer creativity of these approaches and hence the need for a unique term, as the responses are not simply reactive. Less optimistically, we wonder whether it will be less likely in the future that a feminist or indeed any academic can bypass the grants system and achieve a reputation through her scholarship alone.

**Discussion**

**Summary**

In this study, 12 women academics with histories of feminist scholarship told us about some of their experiences in leading research projects, including their successes and frustrations. Given the vast amount of literature now produced on the impact of the neoliberal university on academic work, we expected that their responses might reflect some of the themes in that body of scholarship, and so they did, in particular the pressure to obtain external research funding and the accompanying loss of autonomy. At the same time, as pressures increased, the availability of funding could decline, requiring the women, especially those running research centres, to spend extensive hours bidding for whatever funds they could find. These researchers were also subject to excessive measurement and surveillance of outcomes that were widely perceived as encouraging a degree of individualism and competitiveness that was antithetical to feminist values.

Did these trends impact upon their ability or willingness to conduct feminist research or to lead in ways they might regard as feminist? In our study, participants agreed that much of their research was explicitly or implicitly feminist, but some also indicated that not all of their work
could be so labeled and that they suspected funding bodies were not interested in overtly feminist topics. When speaking of ways of leading, participants appeared conflicted: some thinking that they weren’t assertive enough, others the opposite. Directive or controlling behaviours might move a project along efficiently, but for some they were too redolent of the new, harsh, entrepreneurial university ethos.

It was widely believed that funding bodies prefer team research. Although many reported enjoyable experiences working in teams, positive perceptions were often specifically related to collaborations based on friendship and collegial networks and containing individuals who had similar outlooks and working styles to the PI. In other cases, there were significant drawbacks of working in a team, often exacerbated by external constraints. Problems that may have presented as interpersonal conflicts, for instance, might be related to the pressures experienced by contract or student workers, who were often juggling other priorities or planning their next position.

Research leaders, especially those affiliated with research centres, devoted considerable time and energy to finding funding to keep on workers, resulting in short-term contracts that ironically left the workers so insecure that they would perpetually be searching for another contract. This example is but one way that the contemporary neoliberal parameters were intensifying some of the difficulties of doing research, especially research in a feminist mode that incorporated caring about the welfare of junior staff. Yet we also found much evidence of pleasure taken in the work, successful outcomes, and the clever and creative solutions that we called ‘workarounds’.

**Limitations**

In a small-scale, qualitative, pilot study, generalizations must be made with care. The focus on individuals who had a strong reputation for their scholarship means that they are likely to be successful and resilient. Others might not be doing as well. Nevertheless, we note that even
women who are this successful are pointing to many deleterious consequences of current modes of practice that result in exhaustion and stress. While others might regard them as part of an academic elite, their statements did not appear to us as boastful or prideful – if anything, the opposite.

Some limitations stem from our means of data collection, which resulted in transcripts from recorded interviews in five cases plus seven emailed responses of varied length. As the study was unfunded and exploratory, we designed a simple method of soliciting responses that was not labour intensive for participants and did not accrue substantial costs for us. We found that interviews produced far more data than the emailed responses, which meant we had to be careful not to over-quote and over-feature the interviewees. Another imbalance was that there were more participants from the UK (four) than any other single country. Ideally, we would have designed in-depth interviews that would allow probing into philosophical and epistemological aspects of the participants’ feminist commitments, probed further into what about their leadership practices might be regarded as feminist and collected CVs so that we could track and compare projects and project funding.

A note on reflexivity

Reflexivity in the research process takes multiple forms. It may pertain to the researcher examining the impact of her own positionality on the research; to the relationships between the researcher and the participants; or (less often) to the relationships and interpretive decisions of a team (Doucet 2008; Mauthner and Doucet 2003, 2008; Siltanen et al 2008). As noted at the start of this article, Sandra was curious about whether other PIs would report some of the same frustrations that she had experienced. Her experiences resonated with the general problem of continuity of team membership and commitment throughout the (often extended) life of a project.
and a sense of tension between caring and collaborative approaches on the one hand and the single-mindedness required to move a project to a successful conclusion on the other. There was also an ironic twist in that at the approximate time of writing this article, Sandra, Anne and several other colleagues were building on the results of this study and another pilot project to apply for research council funding, thus themselves immersed in the grants culture and what seemed to be a radical transformation of the application process into a more neoliberal exercise than in the past.

**Further research**

In this article, we have stressed the similarities across countries. However, there were also three intriguing differences that highlight salient areas for further exploration. First, the PIs in the UK and Australia rarely used doctoral students in their projects, relying on contract researchers instead, while those in Canada and the US worked almost exclusively with master’s or doctoral students. New Zealand and Finland seemed to have mixed systems, to judge by our participants’ descriptions. Both ways of operating have consequences connected with power and hierarchy and ability to complete projects with the original team.

Second, when questioned about changes over time, respondents from outside North America were more likely to call upon a discourse that alluded to neoliberal ideas such as accountability, performativity, managerialism and so forth. This variation suggests that the audit culture and the corporatized university may be more pervasive – or more overt – in some countries compared to others (Acker and Webber 2016b). It also suggests a need to discover more about who makes up funding bodies and how decisions are made.

Third, resources available for research, including both funding and time, varied. Respondents from the UK and to some extent Australia seemed to have more sources of funding
and more money allocated to their projects. It was also more common that they were leaders in small segments of very large, complex projects. Simultaneously, they were the most disadvantaged by working within the tightest accountability regimes. Scholars from the UK and Finland had the possibility of European Union funding, which the others lacked. (Post-Brexit, of course, withdrawing from the EU may alter the prospects for UK researchers.) Participants from Canada, New Zealand and (surprisingly) the United States had the fewest funding sources available. We also noted disparities in the amount of time that respondents were able to devote to their research projects. Some seemed to be juggling full teaching loads with little release time, while others had buy-outs and sometimes research fellowships that gave them considerable freedom. As Naidoo (2016) comments, the current emphasis on competition, which she calls a ‘fetish’, tends to naturalize unequal outcomes without attending to unequal starting points.

**Conclusion**

Earlier, we claimed an affiliation with ‘the scholarship of academic research’ (Brew and Lucas 2009, 7). We see many tensions and contradictions in the efforts of feminist researchers to work within university, government and funding body parameters and still do worthwhile, enjoyable research. While there was much to complain about, on the whole, participants were careful to contextualize their frustrations, acknowledging the neoliberal context of academe in which the work was being undertaken. They recognized, for instance, that difficulties with follow-through and collaboration were largely structural issues, resulting from the way that research is organized, rather than dwelling on individual failings. They do their best to create ‘workarounds’ when obstacles become too strong.

Forty years ago, Jennifer Platt (1976, 9) wrote that ‘practical social contingencies in the doing of empirical research . . . have consequences for its progress and outcome’. To this day,
many aspects of social science research production have not been fully explored. Additionally, any conclusions reached must inevitably be provisional, as the context of university work continues to fluctuate.

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