



Affective alignment and epistemic polarization: the case of feminist research in the neoliberalized university

Rebecca W. B. Lund

To cite this article: Rebecca W. B. Lund (2023): Affective alignment and epistemic polarization: the case of feminist research in the neoliberalized university, *Gender and Education*, DOI: [10.1080/09540253.2023.2215067](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2023.2215067)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2023.2215067>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 22 May 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 35



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Affective alignment and epistemic polarization: the case of feminist research in the neoliberalized university

Rebecca W. B. Lund 

Universitetet i Oslo - Centre for Gender Research, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

This article explores affective alignment and epistemic polarization in the field of feminist research, resulting from the neoliberalization of the universities and a performance-oriented research economy. Previous research has described and analysed the ‘epistemic splitting’ that feminist scholars engage in to live up to standardized performance measures and be perceived as ‘proper knowers’ in the neoliberalized university. This article is based on data from 26 interviews with feminist academics, presented as 5 composites, that let us in on their practices and socially organized experiences within the neoliberalized academy. I draw on Sarah Ahmed’s theory of affective alignments to analyse how practices of epistemic splitting are affectively instigated and impelled.

KEYWORDS

Affective alignments;
epistemic polarisation;
epistemic injustice;
epistemic splitting;
neoliberalisation; feminist
Knowledge; academia

This article explores an affective alignment and epistemic polarization in the field of feminist research, following institutional restructurings. In the performance-oriented research economy ‘results are prioritised over processes, numbers over experiences, procedures over ideas, productivity over creativity’ (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 91). Such restructurings not only have epistemic consequences (Morley 2015; Kallio and Kallio 2014), but have an ‘implicit epistemology’ that favours particular kinds of knowledge (Aarseth 2022). The epistemic governance technologies tend to privilege use-value, quantifiable and ‘hard’ evidence, while devaluing ‘critical and social knowledge practices of social sciences and humanities’ (Blackmore 2021, 2). Exploring feminist research, as embedded in the contemporary devaluing of critical social science and humanities, previous research has described and analysed the ‘epistemic splitting’ that feminist scholars engage in to survive in the neoliberalized university and be perceived as ‘proper knowers’ (Pereira 2017a). This article explores how affective alignments contribute to and impel processes of epistemic polarization. My case is a research field where the processes of affective alignment and epistemic polarization, for various historical and political reasons, may be particularly palpable: feminist research in Finnish universities. Feminist research is a field dominated by women and other marginalized groups, and a field that regularly

CONTACT Rebecca W. B. Lund  r.w.b.lund@stk.uio.no  Universitetet i Oslo - Centre for Gender Research, Oslo 0316, Norway

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

becomes subject of debates about epistemic credibility and legitimacy in Finland and elsewhere (see e.g. Kolehmainen and Vuolanto 2021), thereby also making it more vulnerable to some of the affective processes this article deals with.

Processes of neoliberalization of academia in post-industrial societies have resulted in an ambivalence towards gender equality agendas, gender research and feminist scholars (see for example McRobbie 2009; Morley and Lund 2021). One response to this situation is a marked epistemic splitting (Pereira 2017a) wherein the pursuit of integrating critical/liberal agendas and empirical/empiricist knowledge production, that characterized early women's studies and later gender studies, is made more difficult. Inspired by Sarah Ahmed's (2014) theorization of affective alignments, this article focuses on the affective dynamics and processes that both drive and are driven by the splitting and polarization of feminist research in the neoliberalized university. I draw on data from 26 interviews, presented as 5 composites, with self-identified feminist scholars at early, mid and late career levels, broadly aligned with late 2nd generation, 3rd and 4th generation feminist scholarship (see Rampton 2015). They are based in humanities, social sciences and education disciplines across six research universities in Finland.

My analysis shows that two forms of affective alignment are driven by, and further drive, epistemic splitting. On the one hand a splitting *between* feminist scholarly communities and those that are marked non-feminist. On the other hand, *within* the feminist community, where splitting is either considered an act of treason committed by those in positions of power and privilege (e.g. people in permanent positions, at senior levels) in the name of feminism, or considered a necessity for ensuring the survival of feminist scholarship within the neoliberalized academy. I recognize that no affective alignments are permanent, pure or all-encompassing, but historically and contextually produced, reproduced and resisted. My aim here is to explore how these affective alignments are produced in the present case (through my interviews and their field), and how they contribute to creating in-groups and out-groups.

I will contextualize the study by showing how the rapid neoliberalization in the Finnish university produces an affective double movement within feminist research: first, a sense of 'we', a community, emerges among feminist scholars through the shared experience of being the target of negative affects from others. Meanwhile, the sense of 'we' is dismantled in light of the diverging affective alignments arising *within* the feminist community, from competing commitments that polarize existing struggles around the proper subject, object and process of feminist research.

Contextualizing the study: epistemic governance in Finnish universities

Until the 1990s the Finnish state provided the funding for universities and provided legislative and policy frameworks that specified their mandate as public institutions. A new performance-oriented approach to managing Finnish universities, aligned with processes initiated in Anglophone countries, was first adopted in 1995, bringing about a gradual shift towards a market-oriented model involving contractual relations and increased orientation towards quantifiable performance (Kallio and Kallio 2014). However, the *University Act 2009-2010*, including legal and financial autonomy and a new performance-based funding scheme, marked the most radical change (Välilmaa 2012; Ursin 2019). The shifts amount to what I call the neoliberalized university (Collini 2012), in which

basic funding from the Finnish state is distributed based on performance in academic publications, external funding, openness of science, internationalization and student graduates.

When applying for positions, academics are evaluated by 'international standards'. This emphasizes their publications in highly ranked international journals, and their securing of external research funding, preferably from the European Research Council (Kivistö, Pekkola, and Lyytinen 2017). This has resulted in changing academic publication and collaboration practices in Finland, particularly in humanities and social science disciplines, where a significant decrease in the number of single-authored and domestic collaborations and publications has been identified (Puuska 2014). The international research economy, dominated by highly ranked US and UK-based journals, has established a global division of labour, putting certain people and knowledge produced in (semi)peripheral regions at a disadvantage (Connell 2007; Morley 2016). Globally there is also a gendered division of labour. Women are less likely to be journal editors of, or cited in, top journals (e.g. Tight 2008; Wilson 2012); they are awarded fewer research prizes (Nikoforova 2012); and they are less likely than men to be perceived as 'excellent' candidates in career advancement or as Principal Investigators in funding decisions, and are underrepresented in research boards (Gvozdanovic and Maes 2018; European Commission 2021).

Particular disciplines, ways of knowing and methodologies are automatically perceived as more objective, rigorous and analytical (Code 2014; Snickare, Holter, and Liestöl 2022), and these long-standing views are reproduced and strengthened through current emphasis on journal rankings and metrics (Blackmore 2021): women tend to dominate in fields where publication practices are less aligned with the productivity logics of contemporary epistemic governance (Aksnes, Piro, and Nygaard 2022; European Commission 2021; Statistics Finland 2021). Indeed, while the research economy is not *essentially masculine*, it does tend to reward activities and research areas that are dominated by men (Morley 2018). Taken together with statistical evidence about women's career progression across all academic fields and the defunding/devaluation of critical and soft social sciences and humanities generally, it is reasonable to claim that the current research economy is not particularly favourable to feminist research (Blackmore 2021). The eroding conditions of academic work, with uncertain employment and ever-increasing performance demands to demonstrate individual value, produces a climate where 'lack of achievements and inadequate financial resources are viewed as personal failures' and the 'fear of exposure' makes academics less likely to speak openly about their experiences (Gair, Hager, and Herzog 2021, 8; Gill 2009; Sparkes 2007). This also contributes to lack of knowledge about which research bids receive, and don't receive, research funding.

Echoing the work of Miriam David (2015), feminist scholarship can be perceived as a simultaneously political and educational project. While gender/women's studies and the feminist movement were not clearly distinguishable in the early days of interdisciplinary women's studies networks in Finland (see Korvajärvi and Vuori 2016), it has become more so through the professionalization of higher education and the institutionalization of womens/gender studies units with their own curriculum and degree programmes (Korvajärvi and Vuori 2016). The rise of the neoliberalized university has highlighted paradoxes for feminist research and pedagogy (David 2016). To the extent that feminist scholars maintain high productivity levels on standardized performance measures or engage in implementing institutional gender equality and diversity agendas, it is

difficult to argue that they are not producing any value for the neoliberalised university (Pereira 2017b). However, much feminist research, in order to be considered ‘proper knowledge’ – publishable in top-ranking journals within several fields (see e.g. Pullen 2018) – passes through a process of epistemic splitting involving decoupling the empirical and theoretical, from the political and liberational implications (Pereira 2017a; Sifaki 2016; Messer-Davidow 2002).

Feminist researchers are of course not a uniform group, but hold different epistemic and political commitments. Neither is there a pure feminist position from which to critique practices of negotiating diverging commitments and pressures. I argue, however, that academic feminism involves challenging academic norms, dominant ways of knowing, and established perceptions of ‘proper’ knowledge. Despite the fact that the particularities of this endeavour will vary, they have in common an experience of ‘affective dissonance’ (Hemmings 2012): a dissonance between who they want to be and what they are expected to, or enabled to be, be in a gendered society, and within the international research economy. It is the alignment present in the struggles between competing agendas that is explored here.

Empirical materials, methods and theory

This study was inspired by life-course interview methods (e.g. Hutchison 2005). This involves attending to (1) socio-historical location; (2) timing of events; (3) heterogeneity and variability across an individual life and between the lives of the people interviewed; (4) ties to the lives of others and how they shape each other; (5) agency; and (6) how the past shapes future horizons (Black, Holditch-Davis, and Miles 2009). The interviews focused specifically on *becoming* a feminist and a feminist academic, and linking this autobiographical memory to both the wider social context and the institutions shaping continuities and transitions (Smith 2006).

I interviewed 32 self-identified feminist academics at early-, mid- and senior career levels, falling broadly within late socialist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, new materialist, queer or trans commitments (see Rampton 2015). Thus, the study never aimed to provide generalisable results across a specific and narrowly defined group of feminist scholars, but sought to identify a diverse ways-of-being a feminist academic. My own position, as both insider and new-comer/outsider to the Finnish feminist research community, afforded advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, my insider position, as a feminist academic in a fixed-term position in gender studies at a Finnish university, allowed me to carry out sampling by snowballing from people I was already familiar with. Reference to a mutual connection likely afforded trust and willingness to be open and vulnerable. In general, the interviewer-interviewee relation *vis a vis* the diverging politics and commitments of the feminist community, produced interesting insights, as my own commitments as a socialist feminist were also questioned. On the other hand, my position as a ‘newcomer’ brought the risk of missing out on important contextual nuances or specific historical processes at play. To counter this risk, I asked trusted senior Finnish feminist academics to read and comment on my early data interpretations and analysis to ensure recognisability. Given my dataset, I am of course not able to draw any generalizing conclusions about the affective alignments of all Finnish feminists, but I am able to say

something about the *generalizing effects* of contemporary epistemic governance on the emotional production of affective alignments.

Participants were based in humanities, social science and education disciplines across six different Finnish research universities. Some were, or had earlier been, affiliated with gender studies departments at a Finnish university, while others identified as feminist scholars but were not currently, or never had been, based in gender studies units. None of my participants had spent their whole educational or academic career in gender studies. Feminist scholarship was perceived as having an important role in producing critical research and pedagogy, as well as its liberatory strivings (David 2015, 988; Edenheim and Rönblom 2014).

The interviews lasted 1–2 hours, were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed. Most of my interviewees identified as women, a few as non-binary or trans. Zooming in on their academic interests and strategies for surviving/thriving in academia, I identified moments of affective intensity, when it came to how their scholarship was responded to and evaluated in their institution and community, and how they responded to the work of others. The interviews included frank discussions of personal and professional struggles. This made it difficult to use the data while preserving the trust of my participants. A key concern was to maintain anonymity while giving due respect to the specificity of and complex nature of their experiences. I have been inspired by the method of assembling composite first-person narratives as a qualitative approach to selecting, arranging and presenting data from a relatively large dataset (Willis 2019). These accounts are stories, not fictions in that they are based solely on interview data. The only modification to more conventional representations of data, is that data from several interviews are presented as if they were from a single person.

By bringing together several interviews and accounts, I could present an authentic representation while avoiding ‘strict adherence’ to the narrative of any one individual (Willis 2019, 473). Making composites is also analytically justified by the interest of my study, which is less oriented towards distinguishing *between* individual participants and their construction of a feminist identity, and more oriented towards identifying the *different* practices, relations and histories (wider context) shaping affective alignments within the neoliberalized university. The composites needn’t reduce the complexity, and are aligned with the focus of my research.

All interview transcripts were carefully read to identify incidents where being a feminist scholar in the neoliberal university awoke affective intensity and emotionality. The specific incidents chosen to make up the composites were based on three criteria: (1) they allowed the situational context to be explored, (2) they provided interpretation of the incident, (3) they related the specificity of a given incident, to wider ‘normality’ of how feminist scholars are positioned in neoliberal academia.

Willis (2019) has developed a set of practices for ensuring a link between the original transcripts and the final composites, which I have drawn on. Each composite is based on data from 3 to 8 interview transcripts, and all direct quotations come from those transcripts. Any interpretive comments within the composites are taken from the interviewees themselves.

I constructed five composites based on 26 interviews¹, grouping my participants to best convey the variation of social positions, views, emotions and practices reported to me in the interviews (Table 1).

Table 1. Composites.

Name	Information about composite
Inga	A composite of four interviewees, early to mid-career and based in humanities or education and engaged with feminist research.
Eeva	A composite of four interviewees. These are senior-career academics from social science background engaged in feminist activism and gender research.
Minna	A composite of six interviewees, early – to mid-career academics based in social sciences and humanities, who identify explicitly as feminist scholars and activists.
Helena	A composite of four senior academics in the humanities and education, who have witnessed a shift in academia and in how feminist knowledge and research is positioned.
Katariina	A composite of eight academic leaders, self-identified as feminist, and who engage in navigating their leadership practices between their feminist values and neoliberal governance.

To analyse the five composites I draw on Sara Ahmed's (2014) theorization of affective alignments. In much current theory, affects are distinguished from emotions as universal, unmediated pre-social and pre-personal 'unconscious experiences of intensity ... the body's ways of preparing for action' (Shouse 2005, 1). To Ahmed, emotions *involve* bodily movements of affecting and being affected, and affects are not something pre-personal that flows freely between bodies (Ahmed 2014). Affect is always partial and contextual (Ahmed 2010, 39). As a result, Ahmed argues that it is the *object* or *figure*² of affective orientation that flows, and not affects per se. Emotions explain not just how we are affected by these objects, but how we come to share an agreement about how we are affected by them (Ahmed 2014, 208). The proximity of affects around particular objects is historically produced and learned through the body (Ahmed 2014, 214). History mediates particular 'sticky slides' that shape how 'encounters come to happen in this way or that'. To Ahmed, then, the material, the body, is entangled with structures (Schmitz and Ahmed 2014, 97–98). She is interested in the ways in which bodies and affects become oriented towards particular objects in particular ways in particular spaces. To Ahmed, affective responses are

readings that not only create the borders between selves and others, but also 'give' others meaning and value in the very act of apparent separation, a giving that temporarily fixes an other, through the movement engendered by the affective response itself (Ahmed 2014, 28).

I draw on this understanding to explore the relationship between affective and epistemic orientations in the neoliberalized university.

In what follows I analyse the interviews to explore how current transformations are experienced by feminist researchers situated in the Finnish academy. As explained above the composites are introduced as if they were a single person account.

Feminist alignments in the neoliberalized university

Inga: I was presenting my work about academia and most of my male colleagues were there. "My talk offered a gender perspective on the university" based on statistical evidence, historical materials, ethnographic observations and interviews. In other words, it was not a claim that was unfounded, unscientific or unreasonable, but it asked questions about some taken for granted features of the university. The "male professors" got very angry. My character was denigrated and my work ridiculed. Sometimes I was explicitly bullied and at other times treated as if I was invisible, "they didn't talk to me for weeks". My research was perceived as "ruining the image of the university" and the department.

In this composite, Inga, an early career feminist academic, speaks of her colleagues' reactions to a presentation of her work. We are pointed to a disjuncture between what an early career feminist academic *wants* to do and what they learn, rather brutally, they *ought* not do. She wants to contribute to the synthesis of critical/liberatory and empirical/empiricist agendas that often characterize feminist research, but learns that the critical and liberational element is considered out of place. She offers not only a study that reports differences in gender representation at the university, but flags the underlying assumptions and their political implications. Having been invited to present her work, something of a gesture of inclusion, she finds the situation upended, and herself a pariah. The epistemic status of her work, and ultimately her status as a knower is, it would seem, perceived as a threat. In accounting for this experience a generalized group of 'male professors' is evoked by Inga, indicating a certain alignment resulting from a history of attacks on feminist scholars. In several interviews with feminists based in male dominated disciplines, a generalized group of male professors were positioned as fearing having their privilege challenged by being called out for discriminatory practices, while the feminist researchers experienced being positioned by male professors as someone who creates questionable non-objectivist research, installs guilt, creates resentment and ultimately generates a bad atmosphere. This alignment in part comes to define Inga, and others, as a feminist scholar. Even if the particularities of the experiences and epistemic commitments attributed to the composite of Inga may differ, they are united by the experience of being positioned as 'the origin of bad feelings' (Ahmed 2014).

We may ask what it is that happens when feminists speak out against power and injustice in the neoliberalized academy. My participants report that their speech acts are often delegitimized, construed as being 'out of place' and that they are positioned as an ingrate; not thankful enough for having been included in the university. Dualisms between reason-emotionality mind-body are established through hierarchies of knowledge (Rooney 2012; Code 2014). Speaking out against taken-for-granted truths and relations of power, in Inga's case *within the university itself*, is perceived as having failed the standards of reason and proper impartial knowledge. While the feminist scholar experiences being positioned as driven by emotion and partiality, the 'male professors' are experienced as reasserting their association with mind and reason, seemingly unaware of how these explicit or complicit acts of exclusion and bullying are themselves driven by affect and emotion.

The particular experience of being attacked, however, arrives after the generalized figure of 'male professors'. The latter figure is, in turn, the product of a long history of feminists being attacked, ignored and devalued in a male-dominated and misogynist institution. The experience of being marginalized in academia, is, in one way or another, part of being an academic feminist. Helena reports her experiences of how feminist research is evaluated in her field, and the material consequences of this:

Helena: "It is no longer *self-evident*, that gender research is without value. But despite this, whenever I, or the people in my research group, have been evaluated for positions here, we were regarded as too narrow." It is not uncommon that feminist scholars, regardless of how wide a range of phenomenon explored, theories and methods engaged, are perceived as narrow, and are punished for it in job or promotion evaluations. At the same time male academics with very limited research interests and perhaps even a very limited repertoire

of research methods are not regarded as narrow. However, there is also a hierarchy of feminist orientations, some considered more acceptable and less provocative than others.

Helena expresses frustration when explaining that feminist knowledge was positioned as 'too narrow', when it comes to being considered for a permanent position. The feminist scholars, by addressing the particular, the micro, the everyday, were entered into a long-standing hierarchy of knowledge, that has been reaffirmed in the contemporary knowledge economy. Helena suggests that being narrow more easily translates to *focused and brilliant* if connected to particular positivist and empiricist epistemologies and methods – approaches that tend to be masculinized and have historically been dominated by men. Being narrow more easily translates to *narrow-minded* and *un-scientific*, when the researcher engages with methodologies, epistemologies and analysis that tend to be feminized, and dominated by women and other marginalized identities. The result is testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007): *Testimonial* because Helena reports how she and her colleagues experience that their knowledge is not granted epistemic status, and certainly not any status that should result in being awarded a position, due to stereotypes about feminist scholarship; *Hermeneutical* because the conceptual, epistemological, theoretical and methodological resources that a feminist academic uses to make their case is not recognized, sometimes ignored, and other times deliberately misunderstood. The account of Helena is backed by accounts from other disciplines where feminist scholars repeatedly experience being unsuccessful in promotion applications, because their work is not considered proper science:

Eeva: "It's a tough field. My field is very male dominated and the dominant notions of science there are positivist." Qualitative research, and especially things like discourse analysis, artistic approaches, or ethnographic work, is not really appreciated as real science. "There is a lot of institutionalised sexism built into the discipline."

However, even in disciplines that might have been supportive of feminist research, my study showed that changes were taking place as a result of strategic restructurings and department mergers following the *University Act 2009-2010*. Such restructurings would change what came to constitute the dominant orientation, agenda and accepted epistemic practices of the faculty. Helena reported how her department had changed as a result of disciplinary mergers:

Helen: ... suddenly, it became difficult to convince the faculty that critical theory, cultural studies, ethnographic research methods and gender were important. Faculty meetings were dominated by people who were into positivist and quantitative research and who obsessed about getting published in international top journals. This was very frustrating and saddening. We used to let our PhD students do monographs in Finnish because ethnographic studies need pages, it needs consideration of wider context, different levels of analysis and the process of knowledge production. Short essays or scientific articles do not allow that. But monographs were now considered bad by default.

Changes such as those reported by Helena position feminist knowledge production at a disadvantage in terms of gaining recognition and being ascribed value. Indeed, literature has already shown how the international research economy involves an implicit epistemology (Aarseth 2022), which is not necessarily well aligned with feminist epistemology and knowledge production (Blackmore 2021). This becomes a vicious circle, where certain modes of knowing are systematically disfavoured in standardized performance

evaluations, which in turn leads to basic funding cuts and more competition for external funding.

Feminist scholars develop different strategies for responding to the positioning they experience within their respective disciplines.

Here, the account of Minna illustrates her keeping a low profile out of fear for repercussions.

Minna: “For a long time, especially as a PhD student, I was afraid to shake the boat too much, because the male professors, might prevent me from finalising my PhD”. They were sceptical of my feminist ideas and methodology from the beginning. “I had witnessed the use of gate-keeping, where they explicitly blocked people from graduating because they were perceived as *difficult*”.

The account of Eeva illustrates opting out and finding a department where her epistemic status is not questioned:

Eeva: In the end I hit a wall. Like many colleagues before me, “I know a lot of people who have been traumatised by the culture there”, I realised that I could not move forward within that department. I found a home in gender studies. And while gender studies isn’t perfect, at least I don’t have to struggle to be recognised among my everyday colleagues as doing proper research.

And finally, the account of Inga indicates how resistance to devaluing also happens, through collective efforts to push back on the structural and material effects of the epistemic injustice:

Inga: “With the restructuring, schools had to define four or five thematic research areas. Gender was not included in any of these. So, some of us decided to have a meeting and made an open invitation. Something like 20 people from a variety of disciplines appeared, which made it clear that feminist research should be taken seriously by the leadership. Feminist research could not be reduced to two people in the gender studies unit”. We decided to use this position to get a share of the budget, and refuse being left out of discussions about priorities with faculty leadership. So, we created a network, which connects us.

A certain affective alignment around ‘being a feminist scholar’ is established in the neo-liberalized academia through being invisibilized or positioned by a generalized group of ‘male professors’ as failing to live up to the standards of ‘proper science’. This spurs an affective alignment of a collective ‘we’ that is constituted through the experience of causing bad feelings and being a risky investment for the university, the department and discipline. Certain notions of Us and Them, are however also produced within the feminist research community.

Diverging alignments among feminist researchers

Stories about tensions within the feminist community pointed towards thriving *fantasies* of a ‘pure’ feminist position. These fantasies function as an oft-unacknowledged structuring subtext (see Glynos 2011) in diverging affective alignments within the feminist community.

Eeva: ... there is clearly some idealising going on within gender studies due to its historical connection to the feminist movement. It becomes very clear in the case of our students who sometimes seem to think that they have arrived at “the school of activism” and then get

disappointed when they learn that “gender studies as an academic discipline is not exactly the same as doing activism”. This is also a tension we can find at the level of academic staff.

Eeva’s story points towards a tension between, and among, students and academic staff as to how the political and educational endeavour of gender studies should be balanced. The fantasy of gender studies as an extension of a particular political activism and identity politics, can result in generalizing epistemic gestures of positioning certain theories as *automatically* irrelevant or in opposition to certain political interests:

Minna: “I feel uncomfortable in the company of these people.” I am not interested in “old school feminist” theories and concerns that only benefit white middle class cis-women. There are other concerns. Intersectional concerns involving racism, heteronormativity, cis-normativity and anthropocentrism. I know of people who have left gender studies because they were disappointed with the lack of radicality. “If gender studies do not deal with these issues, who will?!”

Such generalizations can be experienced as limiting possibilities for curiosity-driven dialogue and producing new connections.

Inga: “I think that many people would agree with me, that there are particular understandings of power that come together with a post-Saussurian view of language, which constitutes kind of the self-evident epistemic approach in a lot of feminist, queer, trans, and post-colonial research, and that’s so self-evident that *everything else* per definition will be seen as politically naïve or stupid or even unpolitical or, some sort of realism or empiricism” ...

The result is that some theoretical perspectives achieve position as being on the side of social justice, whereas others are out-dated, reactionary and the cause of discomfort.

I would argue that the history of feminists being devalued within neoliberalized academia becomes entangled with, exacerbates and polarizes, existing struggles around what should be the object, subject and politics of feminist scholarship. Such struggles are an integral and often productive aspect of academic debate, and fantasies are a part of these – not least key for identifying alternatives to dominant neoliberal politics and practices. However, ‘overinvestment’ in the fantasy can result in positioning others as an obstacle to the ‘realisation of one’s fantasmatic desire’ to such an extent that productive agonistic debate is inhibited and becomes antagonistic (Glynos 2011, 377). The material conditions of work and the hegemonic academic work practices aid the production of competitive positionality and affective alignments, rather than possibilities for connecting and binding together (Aarseth 2022; Brøgger 2015; Hoffart 2021; Hemmings 2010);).

This becomes visible when it comes to the question of ‘compromise’ involved in epistemic splitting. In order to be heard as voices of reason and scholarship, and remain employable in a highly competitive sector, some feminist scholars may shift from an emphasis on clear epistemic and political commitments in one situation and context, to embracing a more pragmatic or even compromising attitude in others.

Eeva: “I think we need to learn to wear different hats.” Different hats for different occasions. That will be important for future survival, and can also be a strength for gender studies and feminist research.

Katariina: A certain research topic that might otherwise have been considered uninteresting within gender studies, would change status as a result of project funding success, which

would open up vacancies to be filled: “it seems that money speaks [...] Oh God, that’s really an awful thing to say.”

Eeva and Katariina pinpoint how survival in the neoliberalized academy requires flexibility and a willingness to follow the money, to the extent of shifting topical, thematic or theoretical interests, in ways that may compromise feminist commitments. This is of course not *only* a problem for feminist academics, but in a field that explicitly connects the personal, political and epistemic, it can be experienced as particularly troubling. Compromising or following the money may be read by other feminist scholars, and perhaps particularly early career academics in precarious positions, as reproducing the structural and systemic problems feminist scholarship should seek to overcome.

Minna: “If you are lucky enough to get a permanent position, you really need to perform as a superhuman”. At all levels. You have to, also as a feminist scholar, be very ambitious and competitive. Constantly apply for external funding, and ensure that you are producing enough output. Research groups should have broad titles, “they should not include the word feminist”, and they “should include non-feminist scholars”. In other words, be more acceptable to mainstream scholars. I have concrete examples of this. “The problem is that many feminist scholars find it hard to identify with” and the result is estrangement and frustration.

From this perspective, contemporary epistemic governance reconstitutes knowledge as a field of management, administration and asset investment, while eroding the process, purpose and object of feminist knowledge production. Early career feminist scholars’ vulnerability within the system becomes exposed through such stories, but frustration is affectively oriented at those who are seen to compromise the feminist cause, rather than the structures forcing them to do so.

The directing of frustration towards individual academic leaders, rather than structures, results from the way in which the neoliberalized university makes holding a leadership position a double-edged sword for feminists. I have explored elsewhere (Morley and Lund 2021) how, in taking up leadership responsibilities, feminist scholars were forced to translate their feminist ideas and politics into affective labour of buffering and soothing stress, shame, anxiety and fear-for-the-future through communicative and interpersonal skills. However, this work would to some extent reproduce gendered stereotypes and provide little resistance to the neoliberal institutions and practices. Katariina explained:

Katariina: On the one hand, I have been able to carry out some “feminist acts”. Such as negotiate better salaries for women, increase the amount of women in various committees, encourage better work-life balance, and solve conflicts between people. On the other hand, I have sometimes experienced being used as “a tool” by managers above me to implement strategic decisions I disagree with. There is no longer democracy here. “Sometimes when I am in these meetings, where there are plenty of university managers and consultants or whatever they are, when we are talking about the strategies and all that neoliberal stuff, I feel sick.”

Feminist perspectives and commitments are risky investments in the neoliberalized academy (e.g. Blackmore 2021) and, as already pin-pointed, feminist scholars often have to engage in ‘epistemic splitting’ in order to survive. However, my data shows that *within* the feminist community such splitting becomes entangled with, and possibly exacerbates, existing affective alignments. Enabled in part by the *fantasy* of a pure feminist position, epistemic splitting can be cast as an act of treason; while not finding a way of balancing opposing commitments can be cast as counterproductive for the survival of

feminist scholarship altogether. This can make epistemically productive dialogue difficult (see for instance Longino 1993) and further processes of polarization. Such polarization is not conducive for building collective strategies for resisting the neoliberal order and the gendered epistemic hierarchies it (re)produces.

Discussion: affective alignment and epistemic splitting

My analysis of the above composites highlights how affective alignments are produced around the figure of 'the feminist scholar', driven by and driving epistemic splitting. Particular historically constituted affective orientations attach easily to that figure, and as such arrive before the *actual* feminist subject does. This becomes polarising through two different, yet connected, moves of affective alignment. First, the notion of a feminist 'we' is constituted through the historically constituted experience of being positioned by others, most notably by generalized 'male professors', as dangerous for the neoliberalized university and as not producing proper knowledge. Second, this 'we' is destabilized by other affective alignments *within* the feminist community, by attaching to and exacerbating existing divisions concerning what ought to constitute the subject, object and politics of feminist research. These divisions are in part driven by the *fantasy* of a pure feminist position from which others can be critiqued, but also maintained and encouraged through the material conditions of academic work and epistemic practices promoted in the neoliberalized university and research economy. In the neoliberalized university compromise can be cast as anti-feminist by some, while others would argue that not compromising is counterproductive for the survival of feminist research. In both instances, some groups are positioned as the cause of injury, 'the origin of bad feeling' (Ahmed 2014, 117–119).

Finland is part of what has been termed a 'Nordic knowledge regime' (Campbell and Pedersen 2014) and, historically, feminist researchers have collaborated with policy makers and administrators in constructing the 'woman friendly' or 'gender friendly' Finnish welfare state, its social policies, working life policies and economic redistribution. This role was also central in advocating for and justifying the establishment of Women's studies departments in Finnish universities in the early 1990s (Korvajärvi and Vuori 2016). The institutionalization and professionalization of gender studies has not, however, automatically resulted in feminist research being perceived as credible or legitimate within and beyond the university (Korvajärvi and Vuori 2016; Kolehmainen and Vuolanto 2021). Standardized performance measures have to some extent created space for feminist research within an otherwise hostile environment. Through the production of research outputs, and winning of external research grants, feminist researchers could prove that they offered financial and institutional value to the university (see Pereira 2017b). However, the processes of proving value and achieving recognition in the neoliberalized university are not very well aligned with the subject, object and process of feminist research (e.g. Lund 2021; Korvajärvi and Vuori 2016). As a result, feminist scholarship has been criticized for having lost its critical and political edge (e.g. Sifaki 2016). This critique has perhaps been further exacerbated by Nordic debates concerning what kind of politics are 'put forward in the name of feminism' and what kind of 'appropriations and complicities' it involves (Salskov 2020, 251). While self-reflexivity and self-critique is core in the 'political agency' of feminist research (Weigman 2016, 89), and indeed

important elements of all political endeavours, it has been noted that they can, and often do, become ‘routinized gestures in academic and activist settings’ (Salskov 2020, 252). This results in the automatic conflation of theoretical commitment and political commitment; where certain theoretical perspectives are automatically perceived as progressive and ‘good’, while others are ‘bad’ (e.g. Moi 1999; Carbin and Edenheim 2013; Hoffart 2021). This produces antagonist debate *within* and *between* academic communities (Magset, Midtbøen, and Wollebæk 2022) and is counterproductive to developing collective strategies for countering the corrosive effects of neoliberalization.

My goal with this article has been to explore the *effects* of contemporary epistemic governance on the production of affective alignments. Taken together with gendered knowledge hierarchies that call for the ‘wearing of different hats’, and the diverging affective alignments this is driven by and in turn drive, we see how the affective alignments latch on and becomes entangled with *fantasies* about a ‘pure feminism’, and struggles about what constitutes the proper subject, object and process of feminist research.

Conclusion

I have explored affective alignment and epistemic polarization in the field of feminist research resulting from neoliberal institutional restructurings and a performance-oriented research economy. We know from literature that these neoliberal restructurings have an implicit epistemology (Aarseth 2022; Blackmore 2021; Morley 2015). Previous research has described the ‘epistemic splitting’ that feminist scholars engage in to survive in the neoliberalized university, live up to standardized performance measures and be perceived as ‘proper knowers’. I have explored how affective alignments contribute to this epistemic splitting and encourage polarizing processes. It is not my aim to make generalizing claims about feminist researchers, but I will claim that my analysis identifies some of the generalizing *effects* of affective alignment resulting from epistemic splitting.

In my analysis I showed how a feminist alignment happened through the experience of being attacked and devalued by generalized ‘male professors’. The latter were positioned as fearing to be called out for discriminatory practices and have their privilege challenged, while the feminist researcher was experienced as positioned by male professors as someone who produces questionable knowledge and creates a bad atmosphere. These affective orientations seemed to be a key part of being a feminist academic and being a member of a certain feminist research community, but also call forth various strategies for survival in the neoliberalized academy. These strategies – also affectively driven – created diverging alignments within the feminist research community. Epistemic splitting was argued by some to be necessary both for personal and material survival, along with the survival of feminist research in the neoliberalized university. However, by others this was cast as an act of treason, often committed by those in power and/or having the privilege of permanent senior level positions, in the name of feminism. Such positioning of others rested on a subtext fantasy of a ‘pure feminism’. Positioning some as privileged and compromising, linked to wider discussions around what should constitute the proper object, subject and process of feminist knowledge production. Fantasies can be an integrated part of any productive dialogue and struggle, but they can also become the source of antagonism, if particular people and their orientations are positioned as obstacles to the realization of the fantasy. In both instances of alignment some groups are positioned

as the cause of injury, or, in Ahmed's words 'the origin of bad feeling', and this affectively nurtured splitting is not inductive for building collective strategies of resistance to neoliberalization.

The article offers two contributions. Firstly, a theoretical contribution by linking the practice of epistemic splitting to affective alignment, and showing how this is shaped by neoliberalized epistemic governance, the material conditions of academic work and existing debates about the object, subject and purpose of feminist research. Indeed, I would argue that the polarizing effects, pushed by epistemic splitting as a strategy for feminist survival in neoliberalized academia, cannot be understood without exploring how affective orientations spur, and are spurred by this practice.

Secondly, an empirical contribution. The article suggests a way of making the practices and the organization of experience and affective orientations, rather than the individual experience per se, the focus of inquiry. By creating composites based on life-course inspired interviews, I was able to begin with peoples' real-life experiences, without focusing analysis on them. Rather, the intent was to focus attention on the affective processes that are stirred by the structural and institutional processes that call for epistemic splitting. The article shows the productive potential of using these methods for the analyses of phenomena that combine the institutional and affective in the positioning of knowers and knowledge within the neoliberalized university.

Notes

1. The additional six interviews inform my analysis but are not brought to bear explicitly because they did not meet all three criteria outlined above.
2. Famously the hijab wearing Muslim woman, the black man, or the feminist.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my colleagues Helene Aarseth, Jill Blackmore, Sue Wright, Julie Rowlands, Päivi Korvajärvi and Marja Vehviläinen for support and comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the research participants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Rebecca W. B. Lund is a postdoctoral scholar of interdisciplinary gender studies at the University of Oslo, Norway, and an adjunct professor (docent) at the school of social sciences, Tampere University, Finland. She has a particular interest in feminist methodologies, social theory, epistemology and sociologies of knowledge. She has done empirical research focusing on epistemic injustice, affective investments/structures of emotion, feminist leadership and gender-class-race inequalities in academia. More recently she is also engaging with questions of ecological thinking and sustainability. She currently serves as associate editor of *Gender, Work and Organization*, as vice-president for the working group of Institutional Ethnography in the International Sociological Association, and is an associated researcher at the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research, University of Sussex.

Funding

This research was funded by the Academy of Finland, project: 326765.

ORCID

Rebecca W. B. Lund  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7068-6090>

References

- Aarseth, H. 2022. "The Implicit Epistemology of Metric Governance." *Critical Studies in Education* 63 (5): 589–605. doi:10.1080/17508487.2022.2037680
- Ahmed, S. 2010. "Happy Objects." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by M. Gregg and G. J. Seigworth. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Aksnes, D., F. Piro, and L. Nygaard. 2022. "Kjønn og Vitenskapelig Publisering - Betydningen av Kontekst [Gender and Scientific Publication - the significance of context]." In *Kjønn i Akademia - På vei mot balanse*, edited by H. Aarseth and I. Owesen. Fagbokforlaget.
- Ball, S. J., and A. Olmedo. 2013. "Care of the Self, Resistance and Subjectivity Under Neoliberal Governmentalities." *Critical Studies in Education* 54 (1): 85–96. doi:10.1080/17508487.2013.740678.
- Black, B. P., D. Holditch-Davis, and M. S. Miles. 2009. "Life Course Theory as a Framework to Examine Becoming a Mother of a Medically Fragile Preterm Infant." *Research in Nursing & Health* 32 (1): 38–49. doi:10.1002/nur.20298
- Blackmore, J. 2021. "Governing Knowledge in the Entrepreneurial University." *Critical Studies in Education* 63 (5): 622–638. doi:10.1080/17508487.2020.1858912
- Brøgger, K. 2015. "The Rule of Mimetic Desire in Higher Education: Governing through Naming, Shaming and Faming." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37 (1): 72–91. doi:10.1080/01425692.2015.1096191.
- Campbell, J., and O. Pedersen. 2014. *The National Origins of Policy Ideas: Knowledge Regimes in the United States, France, Germany, and Denmark*. Princeton University Press.
- Carbin, M., and S. Edenheim. 2013. "The Intersectional Turn in Feminist Theory: A Dream of a Common Language?" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 20 (3): 233–248. doi:10.1177/1350506813484723.
- Code, L. 2014. "Feminist Epistemology and the Politics of Knowledge: Questions of Marginality." In *SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by M. Evans, 9–25. London: SAGE.
- Collini, S. 2012. *What are Universities for?* Rushden: Penguin UK.
- Connell, R. 2007. *Southern Theory: Social Science and The Global Dynamics of Knowledge*. Routledge.
- David, M. 2015. *Feminism, Gender and Universities: Politics, Passion and Pedagogies*. Ashgate Publishing.
- David, M. E. 2016. "Feminism, Activism and Academe: a Personal Reflection." *Women's History Review* 25 (6): 983–998. doi:10.1080/09612025.2015.1083245.
- Edenheim, S., and M. Rönblom. 2014. "Academic Feminism on its Own: Institutionalization, Organization and Critique." *Tidskrift för Genusvetenskap* 35 (1): 100–121.
- European Commission. 2021. *She Figures 2021 - Gender in Research and Innovation: Statistics and Indicators*. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/06090>.
- Fricker, M. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gair, S., T. Hager, and O. Herzog. 2021. *Compliance and Resistance within Neoliberal Academia*. Springer.
- Gill, R. 2009. "Breaking the Silence." In *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, edited by R. Ryan-Flood, and R. Gill, 228–244. New York: Routledge.
- Glynos, J. 2011. "On the Ideological and Political Significance of Fantasy in the Organization of Work." *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 16 (4): 373–393. doi:10.1057/pcs.2010.34.

- Gvozdanovic, J., and K. Maes. 2018. *Implicit Bias in Academia*. LERU, League of European Universities. <https://www.leru.org/files/implicit-bias-in-academia-full-paper.pdf>.
- Hemmings, C. 2010. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hemmings, C. 2012. "Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation." *Feminist Theory* 13 (2): 147–161. doi:10.1177/1464700112442643
- Hoffart, A. R. 2021. "Intersectional Intersectionality?" Doctoral dissertation. Örebro University.
- Hutchison, E. D. 2005. "The Life Course Perspective: A Promising Approach for Bridging the Micro and Macro Worlds for Social Workers." *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 86 (1): 143–152. doi:10.1606/1044-3894.1886.
- Kallio, K.-M., and T. Kallio. 2014. "Management-by-results and Performance Measurement in Universities – Implications for Work Motivation." *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (4): 574–589. doi:10.1080/03075079.2012.709497
- Kivistö, J., E. Pekkola, and A. Lyytinen. 2017. "The Influence of Performance-Based Management on Teaching and Research Performance of Finnish Senior Academics." *Tertiary Education and Management* 23 (3): 260–275. doi:10.1080/13583883.2017.1328529
- Korvajärvi, P., and J. Vuori. 2016. "A Classroom of Our Own." *Women's Studies International Forum* 54 (1): 138–146. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2015.06.012
- Longino, H. 1993. "Subjects, Power, and Knowledge: Description and Prescription in Feminist Philosophy of Science." In *Feminist Epistemologies*, edited by L. Alcoff and E. Potter, 101–121. London: Routledge.
- Magset, M., A. Midtbøen, and D. Wollebæk. 2022. "Finansieringssystemer og faglige "stammekriger": En trussel mot ytringsfrihet i akademien? [Research economies and disciplinary tribe wars: A threat to freedom of speech in Academia?]." In *Ytringsfrihet i en ny offentlighet: Grensene for debatt og rommet for kunnskap*, edited by M. Mangiest, A. Midtbøen, and K. Thorbjørnsrud. Universitetsforlaget.
- McRobbie, A. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.
- Messer-Davidow, E. 2002. *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moi, T. 1999. *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morley, L. 2015. "Troubling Intra-actions: Gender, Neo-liberalism and Research in the Global Academy." *Journal of Education Policy* 31 (1): 28–45. doi:10.1080/02680939.2015.1062919.
- Morley, L. 2018. "Gender in the Neo-liberal Research Economy: An Enervating and Exclusionary Entanglement?" In *Gender Studies and the New Academia Governance*, edited by H. Kahlert. Springer VS.
- Morley, L., and R. W. B. Lund. 2021. "The Affective Economy of Feminist Leadership in Finnish Universities: Class-based Knowledge for Navigating Neoliberalism and Neoliberalism." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 42 (1): 114–130. doi:10.1080/01596306.2020.1855567.
- Nikiforova, I. 2012. "The Paradox of Excellence: Merit and Occupational Attainments of Women in Computer Science." *Proceedings from GEXcel Theme 11–12: Gender Paradoxes in Changing Academic and Scientific Organisation(s)*, 49–56.
- Pereira, M. 2017a. *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship (Open Access): An Ethnography of Academia*. London: Routledge.
- Pereira, M. 2017b. "Man kan känna utmatningen i luften." *Tidsskrift for Genusvetenskap* 38 (4): 8–30.
- Pullen, A. 2018. "Writing as Labiaplasty." *Organization* 25 (1): 123–130. doi:10.1177/1350508417735537
- Puuska, H. M. 2014. *Scholarly Publishing Patterns in Finland: A Comparison of Disciplinary Groups*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Rampton, M. 2015. *Four Waves of Feminism*. Pacific University of Oregon. Retrieved on May 17th 2023, <https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism>.
- Rooney, P. 2012. "What is Distinctive about Feminist Epistemology at 25?." In *Out from the shadows: Analytical Feminist Contributions to Traditional Philosophy*, edited by S. Crasnow and A. Supersonic, 339–376. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Salskov, S. A. 2020. "A Critique of Our Own? On Intersectionality and "Epistemic Habits" in a Study of Racialization and Homonationalism in a Nordic Context." *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 28 (3): 251–265. doi:10.1080/08038740.2020.1789218.
- Schmitz, S., and S. Ahmed. 2014. "Affect/Emotion: Orientation Matters." *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Geschlechterstudien* 20 (2): 97–108. <https://doi.org/10.3224/fzg.v20i2.17137>.
- Shouse, E. 2005. "Feeling, Emotion, Affect." *Media/Culture Journal* 8 (6). doi:10.5204/mcj.2443.
- Sifaki, A. 2016. "Which Side are we on? Feminist Studies in the Time of Neoliberalism or Neoliberal Feminist Studies." *Women's Studies International Forum* 54 (1): 111–118. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2015.06.011
- Smith, D. E. 2006. *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Snickare, L., Ø. G. Holter, and K. Liestøl. 2022. "Men, Masculinities and Professional Hierarchies." In *Gender Equality in Academia - from Knowledge to Change*, edited by Ø. G. Holter and L. Snickare, 53–79. Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Sparkes, A. C. 2007. "Embodiment, Academics, and the Audit Culture: a Story Seeking Consideration." *Qualitative Research* 7 (4): 521–550. doi:10.1177/1468794107082306.
- Statistics Finland. 2021. *Gender Equality in Finland 2021*. Helsinki: Statistics Finland.
- Tight, M. 2008. "Higher Education Research as Tribe, Territory and/or Community." *Higher Education* 55 (5): 593–605. doi:10.1007/s10734-007-9077-1
- Ursin, J. 2019. "Higher Education Reforms in Finland: From a Ponderous to a More Agile System?." In *Higher Education System Reform: An International Comparison after Twenty Years of Bologna*, edited by B. Broucker, K. De Wit, J. C. Verhoeven, and L. Leišytė, 67–77. Brill Sense. doi:10.1163/9789004400115_005.
- Välilmaa, J. 2012. "The Corporatization of National Universities in Finland." In *Universities and the Public Sphere*, edited by S. Pusser, K. Kempner, S. Marginson, and I. Ordorika, 115–134. New York: Routledge.
- Vuolanto, P., and M. Kolehmainen. 2021. "Gendered Boundary-work within the Finnish Skepticism Movement." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 46 (4): 789–814. doi:10.1177/0162243920947475.
- Weigman, R. 2016. "No Guarantees: Feminism's Academic Affect and Political Fantasy." *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice* 37 (2): 83–95.
- Willis, R. 2019. "The Use of Composite Narratives to Present Interview Findings." *Qualitative Research* 19 (4): 471–480. doi:10.1177/1468794118787711
- Wilson, R. 2012. "Scholarly Publishing's Gender Gap: Women Cluster in Certain Fields, According to a Study of Millions of Journal Articles, While Men Get More Credit." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. October 22 2012.