

A Stressed Present and a Scared Future: An Autoethnography of a Migrant Scholar in Finland

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ABSTRACT

As an international doctoral researcher with a new-born daughter by my side, I reveal, in this autoethnography, the struggles to survive in the academic labor market of a non-Anglophone country, Finland. This personal narrative combined with sociological theory of Marxism brings a bottom-up perspective of international doctoral students. The purpose is to look inward and expose my vulnerable self that has been affected, moved and refracted by the academic neoliberalism causing alienation and my resistance. Explaining academic work as labor through vignettes, I present four cases of Marxist alienation that correlates with the alienation of early career researchers from the product (research output), process (doing research), species-essence (the passion of research) and other workers (academic colleagues). The findings of this autoethnography reiterates that academic labor is indeed in crisis. I recommend as researchers we should recognize this estrangement of academic labor and bring change through personal agency and ethical accountability.

Keywords: academic labor, alienation, autoethnography, early career researchers, international doctoral student, Marx

I: Ignorant and naive... I should have found out more about the prospects for doctoral researchers in Finland before starting my doctoral journey here as an international student. Were the challenges this profession brings not strong enough for me to decide to start my PhD studies and motherhood at the same time? I cannot forget that feeling of ecstasy

when, after a week of becoming a new mother, I was accepted into the doctoral program. However, that elation left me when I realized that this acceptance is a piece of paper only offering you a ‘registered’ position. It does not guarantee you funding, it does not automatically provide office space and equipment and it does not ensure you a secure future. Nonetheless, it expects you to work like a maniac while putting a price tag on your passion.

They: Nobody expects that from you, it’s your choice! The university websites clearly mention that registered position does not guarantee funding and you have three options to fund the doctoral research: paid university position, grant research, and self-funding. I think you are forgetting that the university provides you supervisors, courses, library access, open access publishing grant, language revision services and an affiliation with a world’s highly ranked institution which would cost you a lot otherwise.

I: See, here is where the universities communicate that ‘funding is your problem!’ The websites do not communicate that how much work the grant applications require! How to face rejections? How many rejections? Maybe I am being ungrateful for the resources the university is providing but look at my situation, I am about to defend my PhD thesis soon but without any funding!

They: It happens with some of the early career researchers either nationals or internationals, but usually they eventually get ‘lucky’ and get funding, so why are you portraying a negative image of Finnish higher education to the world through this autoethnography?

I: I highlight the struggles of early career researchers in Finland which have already been in debate since last few years (Aarnikoivu et al., 2019; Helena, 2017; Pyhältö et al., 2012; Trifuljesko, 2021). However, what is missing from the literature is the personal narrative of doctoral researchers and especially international doctoral researchers, therefore I used a bottom-up approach to uncover the unseen, undiscussed and unexpected dynamics of doing a PhD in Finland. While I am informed that this might not be the journey for all international doctoral researchers in Finland, I do believe that my experiences will enlighten people (international students, university officials, funding agency staff) about the self-reflexive process against neoliberal policies in higher education. The main question I am addressing through my epiphanies of struggle is: How does the precariousness of the profession, intensified competition, high workload, and academic capitalism results into alienation of academics?

They: How does your autoethnography make a difference, as you are not alone; there are thousands like you who have been in this precarious profession not just in Finland but around the globe?

I: My autoethnography serves as a practice of resistance against academic neoliberalism and a representation of a minority group of scholars (migrant PhD researchers and mothers) in a non-Anglophone

country (Finland) about which little is known. Considering Marxist ideology, resistance is the result of recognition of the contradiction between ideology and experience; it raises awareness to recognize the contradiction and calls to action for change. It enables scholars to think beyond the limits of the capitalist structure in higher education and identify practices which can bring change, such as ethical accountability and personal agency. Thus, this autoethnography is an elaboration of how the epiphanies of an international mother-student aroused the consciousness to resist and exercise personal agency and hopefully bring change to the system. Since the early career researchers in Anglo-Saxon universities are also influenced by similar neoliberal educational reforms and precariousness (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2020), this research will be applicable to those settings as well.

In this paper, my aim is to provide a critical and constructive perspective of an international doctoral student in Finland, to unravel the higher education setting of which I am a part. I explain academic work as ‘labor’ and use Marx’s perspective of the ‘alienation of labor’ (Marx, 1992[1867]) to describe the identity crises of academic scholars. The purpose of this autoethnography is twofold. First, it provides a reflexive analysis of my own experience as a doctoral student in the social sciences, embedded in Marx’s theory of alienation. Second, this research provides an analysis of the structural characteristics of Finnish academia as a labor market. Hence, this paper will hopefully help early career researchers prepare themselves better for the struggles this profession brings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students as Skilled Migrants in Finland

Degree students who migrate to study outside their home country are described as international students (Eskelä, 2013). There is a growing demand for international students both globally and in Finland (Maury, 2021). International students are commonly regarded as ‘ideal’, ‘highly skilled’ and ‘wealthy’ migrants (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021; Maury, 2021) and are often young and suitable for the workforce. When they acquire skills and knowledge in the host country their credentials are acceptable in the labor market; they have the ability and are usually expected to learn the host country’s language; and lastly, they often finance themselves (by paying tuition fees and for accommodation) to get the degree (Hawthorne, 2008). In short, they have a competitive edge to offer in global knowledge economy. As an international student from a developing country, I acquired my skills through voluntary internships and a master’s degree, I passed the Finnish language proficiency test, and I am ‘self-financing’ myself to do my PhD. In consideration, I migrated to Finland with certain set of expectations regarding my career, lifestyle, and well-being. I appreciate the society I am part of, the lifestyle it offers, and the well-being it provides. However, the unmet expectations regarding my career resulted in tremendous disappointment and resentment as explained later.

Apart from revenue generation, Finland is in dire need of attracting and retaining international students due to emerging demographic crisis (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021; Calikoglu, 2018). Therefore, the number of international students in Finland in 2017 was 20,362, a trebling increase since the 2000s (Maury, 2021). The existing studies on international students in Finland have focused on their problems with immigration policies (Maury, 2021); the challenges of employability in the Finnish labor market (Alho, 2020; Shumilova, Cai, & Pekkola, 2012); the retention rates of international students in Finland (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021); and their views on supervision (Filippou, Kallo, & Mikkilä-Erdmann, 2017). However, all these studies have predominantly focused on master's students and the personal narratives of international doctoral students in Finland are missing from the discourse.

Setting the Scene: Finnish Higher Education Reforms

Finnish higher education has gone through major educational reforms during the last two decades. Although these educational reforms were not an exception to what is happening globally in academia, these transformations happened later when compared to USA or other European countries. Until the 1990s, the Finnish government was responsible for (managed) the universities. However, in 1995, a performance-based system to manage universities was implemented. It was followed by the introduction of market oriented educational reforms in 2009-2010 through the University Act which brought a radical change in funding models and resulted in major budget cuts for the universities (Välilmaa, 2012). These reforms changed the landscape of Finnish academia, transforming public universities into public corporations by changing the civil service employment of staff into contractual positions (Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017), generating revenue from international students and creating precarious and vulnerable academic staff. The consequences of blurring of boundaries between the public (state) and private (market) in a previously known public university caused a deterioration of relations between the 'capital' and 'labor' in the higher education sector. Also, these reforms changed the academic knowledge into 'intellectual property' that can be commodified and exchanged (Nikkola & Tervasmäki, 2020). With the enactment of these reforms, the amount of external funding and the number of publications became the major criteria for the funding of universities (Kallio, Kallio, Tienari & Hyvönen, 2016). These market-driven reforms introduced competitiveness, job insecurity, individualism (Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017) promoting any 'revenue-generating activity' or 'academic capitalism' behaviors (see Slaughter and Leslie, 1997).

Academic Labor in Crisis

These reforms changed the ethos of academia from a 'Humboldtian collegium to a competitive market' (Kallio et al. 2016) and hence effected the work of academics negatively. The number of permanent academic positions was reduced and replaced by underpaid, temporary positions with little or no career

progression. In Finland, the proportion of temporary positions and casualized work is reported to be higher than other Nordic countries (Bégin, Jansson, & Beaupré, 2018). In addition, seniority does not guarantee job security in Finnish academia. Employees in senior positions in the academic labor market also end up with fixed term contracts (Bégin et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, researchers embrace this precarity and become adapters of the system (Herschberg, Benschop, & van den Brink, 2018).

In addition, the opportunities for the university's employees to participate democratically in decision making process were narrowed and bureaucracy uprooted academic well-being. This weakening autonomy of academic staff marks the subsumption of their labor to those who direct the university (Szadkowski, 2016). Overall, the introduction of this neoliberal turn in Finnish education was 'undemocratic' in nature as it was imposed on the academic staff without the engagement of academic staff (Fitzsimmons, 2015). In their recent study, Nikkola and Tervasmäki (2020) argue that despite the worsening conditions, Finnish academics have remained passive and there has not been any 'substantial resistance' so far.

Positioning Research

The baseline research of this autoethnography has already summarized the problems of the neoliberal turn taken by European universities (see Khan, 2021). These include (a) the precariousness of the profession; (b) the ambiguity of the future; (c) research being subjected to 'value for money' concepts; (d) invisible and unfair recruitment processes; and (e) the trend of metrics weighing quantity over quality. In later sections of this paper, I discuss these challenges with the help of a methodological and theoretical framework.

METHOD

I chose autoethnography as a method to write about myself because it combines both autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). It is a research method through which one can examine the experience of others from their standpoint (Coffey, 1999). It is different from other methods of writing about the self, like autobiography, memoir or even self-ethnography (insider or at-home ethnography) which focus on studying our own institutions but not necessarily ourselves (Alvesson, 2003). It is a highly personalized account and one way of writing autoethnography is to combine the personal narrative with concepts from literature (Wall, 2008). I combined my vignettes with a classical sociological theory in my analysis. It is a self-focused qualitative method and is often criticized because of its strong focus on self (Mendez, 2013). Apart from being 'self-indulgent creatures', auto ethnographers are also criticized for not producing valid research and for giving a biased view of their world (Ellis, et al, 2011).

Research Design

Ethnographic and interview methods may not fully uncover the issues in the same magnitude or breadth as perhaps an autoethnographic method. Because of the benefits of choosing this method over other methods for research in a higher education setting, my reason for choosing autoethnography was to show where I stand as an international doctoral student in Finland. There are a few autoethnography accounts in higher education which have challenged the various forms of discrimination in academia. In her autoethnography, Gill (2016) talks about breaking the silence and speaking up to those in power about the human cost of performing as ‘neoliberal subjects’ in academia. Similarly, Foster’s (2017) autoethnography highlights the effects of neoliberalism in teaching, scholarship and administration subsuming academic freedom and causing anxiety among academic workers. Griffin’s Black feminist autoethnography (2012) is another example of using voice against the systemic oppression of women of color in academia. In line with these autoethnographic accounts of speaking up against power in academia, I took this autoethnography as a form of resistance against academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) that is causing the alienation of researchers. Academics in general are hesitant to talk about the precarity of their profession as they are afraid to sound self-indulgent or narcissist (Gill, 2016). Researchers tend to mask their financial hardships, insecurities, and precarious work to keep up with the nobility of the profession. However, instead of hiding the impact of my experiences in my research, I took the autoethnographic approach to acknowledge those hardships (Ellis, et al, 2011). The purpose of this research is to look inward and expose my vulnerable self that has been affected, moved, and refracted by the challenges of alienation.

Data Collection

This autoethnography draws on an invisible, yet inseparable part of my doctoral research. The main empirical material draws on my personal diary and journals I kept as I collected and analyzed the biographical narratives of 20 social scientists of several nationalities (including Finnish) and career stages in Finland. As I interviewed them about the challenges of the Finnish academic labor market and their mobility decisions in the long run, I analyzed and questioned myself too. Along with the personal diary, the headnotes in the form of impressions and experiences played a major role. For instance, during the analysis of the interviews, in which the phrases used by participants like ‘you must be familiar’ and ‘just like your experience’ prompted me to opt for this approach. Some research participants explicitly mentioned that I embodied my research topic (being an insider), while others questioned my migrant background (being an outsider) to research such topics (Alvesson, 2003).

I jotted down taken-for-granted practices as an early career researcher in my personal diary. I have used epiphanies of my struggle in this academic environment as an analytical tool to interpret my coded journey. These epiphanies are those notable crises, experiences, memories, recollections, and emails which significantly affected my lived experience as an early career researcher in Finland (Ellis et al., 2011).

Data Analysis

I conducted applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012) to examine my journey so far in Finnish academia, particularly important sections. After carefully examining my diary and reading it multiple times with intervals, I identified themes and reviewed them for coherence. I then assigned codes to my data. My data consisted of 12 codes: precarity, overwork, anxiety, alienation, neoliberalism, isolation, competition, network, job security, prospects, resistance, conformation. For analysis, I made links between codes, excluded some by using a reduction technique, removed the repeated ones, merged some and added some new ones by using gap analysis (Guest et al., 2012). I intertwined the codes with the most suitable theoretical framework to explain my autoethnographic account.

Limitations

The process of liberating oneself from the research setting and paradigms in autoethnography is also loaded with challenges and limitations. The reality is that you will be facing the readers of your research with a strong and direct personal interest causing the challenges of 'relational ethics' (Ellis et al., 2011). To address this challenge of not 'backing off' from a sensitive topic (Hoffman et al., 2015), or hiding some parts of my disturbing epiphanies, I welcomed the critical feedback from my peers. I had open discussions with support groups and made the iterations accordingly. Another challenge was that while writing this paper, I encountered various versions of my former self, not being open minded about 'myself' but always looking for the 'Other' like 'Whose fault is this?' However, the process of writing this self-reflexive piece enabled me to figure out my own identity.

FINDINGS

An Autoethnographic Perspective Grounded in Marxism

Drawing on the Marxist concept of alienation in Volume I of *Capital* (Marx, 1959), I present my struggle in the Finnish academy in light of the theoretical frame of accumulation of capital manifested in neoliberal higher education policies. Traditionally, alienation has been confined to industrial workers and industrial production, but in today's knowledge economy in which production of knowledge has been commodified, alienation becomes an interesting concept in higher education analysis. According to Marx, labor is the work we do which is just not limited to working for a living and reproducing products; rather it is the labor which the worker enjoys, gets creative with, and is meaningful (Harley, 2017). This Marx's labor produces useful things and thus has use-value. However, capitalism replaces use-value with exchange value, putting emphasis on just the quantity of the product rather than the quality or unique characteristics of the product (Szadkowski, 2016). In short, what matters in capitalism is that the

product should be sold for more than the cost of production and hence generate surplus.

For the neoliberal university, the exchange value of the research is tied to publishing more in high-ranking journals to enhance the performance-based funding of the university. In short, there is a constant drive to increase the surplus by producing something; it is about the quantity and not the quality, it is about competing for limited resources, it is about working more in a shorter time. The immediate consequence of this for young academics like me is the ensuing 'alienation'. Thus, here I take academic work as 'labor'. The essence of human capital in the era of neoliberalism has been changed. It has made long term employment obsolete. Now, the employee (neoliberal subject of value) embraces 'white collar precarity' by jumping from one temporary contract to another because of the fear of not being able to making the ends meet otherwise (van Doorn, 2014). The work in neoliberal universities is just like being in a 'factory without walls' where exploitation of labor happens at the disposal of profit, thus it is academia without walls (Gill, 2016). From the lens of Marx's conception, I could situate the estrangement of academic researchers as a byproduct of exploitative practices of capitalist accumulation process. Marx articulated the four ways of estranging labor, (which are discussed below), in the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts* (Marx, 1992[1867]).

A) The alienation of the worker from the product

The first type of estrangement is between the worker and the product of their labor. It appears that the control or power of the product does not lie in the hands of the producer; rather it belongs to the capitalist who controls the means of production (Marx, 1992[1867]). Moreover, the capitalist has the power to decide what the design of the product will be instead of the workers applying their labor to make that product. As the product belongs to capitalist who puts the money into the production of the product, the more workers use their labor to manufacture the product, the more the product becomes alienated from them. In academia, one can easily relate to universities and funding institutions as the powerful entities promoting academic capitalism (Szadkowski, 2016). This academic capitalism endorses standardization and quantification of academic work. The universities act as capitalist providers who exploit and alienate early career researchers. These profit-seeking institutions offer the early career researchers neither the funding nor the sufficient means of production, yet they accumulate the benefits of research. Further, as Fitzsimmons (2015) contends 'Finnish students are now pressured to finish their learning as quickly as possible so that the university can receive the necessary operating funding from the state'.

My doctoral journey started in September 2019 as a part time student since I had a newborn daughter to take care of and I had no funding to support my research. My supervisor helped me to get grants for other projects and teaching experiences, but I was not able to secure any scholarship for my own research which I was hopeful for.

They: Who forced you to do your PhD without funding?

I: The higher education system! A good funding application needs published results. In order to get results, you need to work and when you work, you work for free. I got feedback for one the funding applications that my CV does not have any publications, the stronger applicants did. Thus, it was not a choice, it was a requirement for funding.

They: So, are you saying that this a fault of the university?

Me: I think everyone has a piece of fault in this. Researchers accept this subsumption to capital as we do this for free even when we don't fully understand the implications of doing so. Universities/departments do not provide funding for all accepted PhD students but grow their research outputs and recognition by their research. Funding agencies prefer commercializable research agendas and funding applicants with publications.

I can now see how academic capitalism work, how productivity matters for every researcher including me. For instance, I jotted in my diary on 18 March 2021 when the publisher of my first article asked me to provide 'physical address for my unit (not a PO Box)'. It was a feeling of self-pity and despair. I provided the address of my supervisor. As an early career researcher, I am neither provided with funding nor even an office space or research equipment (like a laptop, recorder, or books) to carry out my research. However, when I graduate and as I built up my research profile by publishing in highly ranked international journals which again is a criterion for completing the PhD, the university will get the benefit of it. In addition, this type of estrangement is seen in the hands of funding agencies who have the power to decide which research should they fund and why. In this way research outputs become tasks imposed by others and the research is done to please or satisfy the demands external to the activity itself. I remember there were multiple occasions when I saw a funding opportunity and thought of changing my research agenda according to the theme. Here one can argue that the work of early career scholars is not as simple as wage-labor relationship, it is complex because the scholars still retain the ownership of the product i.e., their publications. Thus, I can state that academic alienation is not as strong as that of most wage laborers. Nonetheless, it cannot be neglected that due to the unpaid and underpaid labor we as academics do for being researchers, editors and peer reviewers, the meaningfulness, joy, and creativity of the product is lost.

B) The alienation of the worker from the process

Estrangement does not just happen in the product but also with the activity of production (Marx, 1992[1867]). Under capitalist control, we see this type of social separation of the features and process of production from the actual producers. The capitalist takes away authority and freedom from the laborer and the laborer lose control over the means of production in terms of their thoughts, resources, and time. Production is forced on workers in exchange for wages. Thus, the process is controlled externally by the capitalist which alienates the worker.

Academics face this alienation in the form of the subjugation of academic freedom, the way they want to carry out their research. Academic freedom has been so valuable for researchers to undertake research on the topic of their choice, as they want to be trusted for their research and work patterns (Henkel, 2009). I came to Finland as a social sciences master's student. I was fortunate to be able to do my mandatory master's internship with a research group working with an advisory forum for the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. There, I discovered the gaps in the Finnish higher education policy for attracting foreign talent, especially international doctoral students in the social sciences. I opted to research this gap as my PhD thesis. I chose this challenging yet bold topic out of my motivation to highlight the unsaid challenges faced by doctoral students. While some academics choose safe research agendas which can guarantee funding, I did not think through my research agenda from a financial standpoint. In my opinion I did not opt for a 'safer' research agenda which would ensure conformity and a conservative outlook, instead I took the risk of telling the bitter truth. Nonetheless, the price I had to pay was that I got rejections from more than 15 grant applications.

They: Well, 15 rejections are not unusual for academics!

I: Alas! This is what our system does not communicate to aspiring PhD researchers.

For social sciences researchers, their critical research work must meet the criteria of fundable research. That there are commercializable research agendas is illustrated by the universities and the funding agencies. As Oleksiyenko (2018, p. 203) contends, in this competition fetish generated by neoliberalism, universities 'become producers of intellect-free and wasteful zones of alienation that are both poisonous and demoralizing'.

As an early career researcher, I am part of the academic system. Although I am at the bottom of the power pyramid, I face this alienation of the research process whenever I must sell my research to grant funders. One of my peers said to me "you should not be so critical about policies; it will not guarantee you funding" while she was reviewing my grant proposal. Thus, whether it is the possession or absence of money, it alienates you from the process. Academic publishing and specifically publishing in high-ranked international journals becomes a means for higher education to market itself, to for authors to increase their ranking and to improve institutional visibility (Mathies, Kivistö, & Birnbaum, 2020). However, the significance of the academic output to the knowledge field is undermined.

To summarize, the process of surviving in academia as a researcher is what requires you to be market oriented rather than research oriented. Because the Finnish performance-based system is just like a 'zero sum game' in which the higher education institutions receive funding based on their performance, consequently it puts a pressure on the academics to publish in high-ranked journals (Mathies et al., 2020).

C) The Alienation of the Worker from the Species-essence

The third category of estrangement is the most thoughtful one in the case of academic researchers. It is about the alienation of workers from their *species-being* (Marx, 1992[1867]). In Marxist ideology ‘species-being’ separates human labor from animal productivity. Humans rely on objects for laboring which in other words is their passion. What current academic capitalism is doing is to place a price tag on scholars’ passion and separate them from the actual joy of doing intrinsic work. I feel the alienation from species essence as a researcher is a consequence of the demand for accelerated results in a short time, the precariousness of the profession and long work hours. Now we as academics are more concerned about how we can publish three articles with the same data instead of one. It does not matter to us whether the article produces new knowledge or recycles the old, for us as neoliberal subjects, the thing which matters is ‘it should be sold’ (Harley, 2017). For me, researching about less privileged groups of migrant scholars is a transformative and empowering process, hence it is closer to my species-being or object of labor in Marxist terms.

I often see my identity shifting hour-by-hour between my roles as a researcher, mother, colleague, international student, and woman. However, I questioned my identity and my species-essence when I applied for unemployment benefit from Kela (the Finnish social security institution). I jotted down in my diary on 9 August 2021 about the critical yet disturbing memory. Kela rejected my application on the basis that I am not categorized as an unemployed person since I am a full-time doctoral student. It hit me hard with the fact that “Am I even a worker?” However, as advised by my peers, I applied for student benefit from Kela but then again, my application was rejected. This whole process shook me to the core. I found myself as an invalid member of the community: neither a student nor an employed/unemployed person. In retrospect, my duties were more combined as a student and an employee than as being only a student or only an employee. Nonetheless, nobody was responsible for giving me the rights as an employee and as a student. The university gives you a platform as a ‘registered doctoral student’ providing you with a supervisor, access to library resources and the opportunity to take postgraduate courses, but it is not responsible for your workload, stress, funding, career progression, office space, equipment, and emotional burnout. This precariousness of academic researchers in Finland alienates them from their very being and from the reason they began to undertake research. The acceleration in the prevalence of short-term fixed contracts in Finnish academia indicates a less privileged status of early career academic researchers. As Välimaa (2012, p.106) describes ‘pejorative names such as “stump workers” (pätkätyöläinen) or “project researchers” (projektitutkija) indicate quite well the process of polarization and their low status inside and outside universities’.

This alienation effects early career researchers more than other academics because we hope that if we publish more, work more, network more, and perform more, we could eventually reach our species-being. The current academic capitalism forces researchers into the constant race of publish or perish which keeps them on their toes. It disturbs their social life. Not surprisingly, academic stress and health issues related to that are an integral part of this overwork

(Aarnikoivu et al., 2019). The workload is not just challenging physical labor but also the emotional labor invested in the work. My mother's guilt always hits me hard every day as I feel like I am stealing time from my child. It is not just the research which keeps you occupied; it is the hours of labor put into writing funding applications which do not even have a standard format. It is also the pressure to fill your CV with just not research but collaborative research, short term mobility, teaching experience and administrative experience. For international students, it is accompanied by the stress of learning the Finnish language. I have taken more courses to learn Finnish than my actual postgraduate coursework. These requirements of neoliberal university burden the researchers with endless responsibilities yet giving them the room to think that they can choose to prioritize and plan. In short, these top-down policies to manage competitiveness are counterproductive as they are eroding the self-esteem and passion of knowledge workers (Watermeyer & Olssen, 2016).

D) The Alienation of the Worker from other Workers

To strive in the capitalist era of production, Marx comprehends that workers trade on their labor power which increases the competitiveness among workers (Marx, 1992[1867]). Thus, instead of promoting social-economic activity, the work tends to encourage individual struggles. This competitive mindset tends to alienate the worker from her coworkers. This type of alienation tears us apart (Harley, 2017). While examining competitiveness in Finnish academia, it is observed that this competitiveness erodes the collegiality between the researchers (Kallio et al., 2016). Oleksiyenko (2018, p.196) contends 'as competition intensifies in global higher education, more top scholars seek opportunities to outperform each other and push for administrative regulations that facilitate the harvesting of the highest possible awards and grants, locally and internationally'.

I personally encountered this alienation on 13 March 2021 when my colleague replied to my request for a research data interview with a disturbing email. The colleague mentioned that the topic which I opted to research was the colleague's research interest, therefore the request for an interview was declined. It was a disturbing reply for me as it would be a nightmare for me to sabotage someone's research idea. This incident made me think that as neoliberal subjects in academia we are worried about competitiveness than collegiality.

They: Then what about the role of your supervisors, peers, and network? Did not they help you with your manuscript revisions, grant proposals and overall counselling?

I: Yes, they were there, and they helped me in every way possible. I could not have come this far in my research without their support. However, there were people in this doctoral journey who made me realize that your reputation and academic worth determines your network. I have observed the lack of solidarity among academics in Finnish universities: between the Finns and the internationals, the ones with funding and the ones without, the ones with offices and those without, the ones who speak Finnish and those who do not, the ones in

projects and teams and the ones who are not, the ones who teach and those who do not.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this autoethnography revealed that how an international doctoral student in Finland goes through various forms of alienation due to her 'academic labor'. The neoliberal reforms in Finnish higher education have made the academic workers as 'neoliberal subjects of value' (van Doorn, 2014). The alienation from the product happens when the university does not provide sufficient means of production or resources to early career academics who are affiliated with the universities. The alienation from the process of production happens when the universities and funding agencies fund only commercializable research agendas. The alienation of the species-essence happens when the researchers are more worried about making their research marketable than enjoying the intrinsic motivation of doing such research. Lastly, the alienation of workers happens due to competitiveness and the drive to outperform each other. In short, the analysis of this autoethnography grounded in Marxism reiterates that 'academic labor is indeed in crisis'.

In the current higher education landscape, knowledge work is a result of conformity rather than creativity, because academics try to compete for research outputs (Watermeyer & Olssen, 2016). Scholars become so embedded in the system by fulfilling its expectations and requirements, that they completely shut down their opportunity to resist. Now the question for me is: Do I want to come to terms with this system, or do I want to bring about change?

When a doctoral student graduates, they hope to become a better version of themselves and advance their expertise in that area to contribute to its development. However, when I see my future in Finnish academia, I see myself as a publication machine regardless of producing any meaningful content, fluent in the Finnish language, either being unemployed or being poorly paid – precariousness, indulged in chronic anxiety of job insecurity and having high levels of stress due to workload. In short, an international student veteran combating the long social, economic, and academic odds. On the other hand, those publications are a hope to guarantee me the joy of doing my work i.e., my species essence. However, I do not want to embrace this dark future 'living in the fear of freedom' and believing that 'there is no alternative' by showing 'blind acceptance to neoliberalism' (Fitzsimmons, 2015). One option for me is to emigrate from Finland, the second option is to quit academia, and the final option is to challenge the power structures.

Being part of this system, I see myself as an active agent with long term goals rather than passive subsumption of academic labor under capital (Szadkowski, 2016). I find the acts of resilience, reworking and resistance supported by Katz (2004) as an answer of social transformation to these neoliberal practices in academia. If done at individual and collective levels, a change can be brought about. This autoethnography is a proof that at an individual level I tried to be fearless and not conform to the system. It is hard to deny that it is risky yet

challenging to step up and criticize our 'own organization, institution and/or profession in the first person' (Hoffman et al., 2015). My doctoral research topic is critically analyzing the higher education policies in Finnish academia, it requires me to be open about complex issues like social justice and power dynamics. It can also be done at a collective level if we act in a socially responsible manner and produce impactful research. One thing which we can do as researchers against this alienation is to make our labor 'concrete', we are a better judge of our work and what is meaningful and what is not (Harley, 2017).

CONCLUSION

In this autoethnography, I have exposed my vulnerable self to fight against the estrangement caused by neoliberal higher education policies. The whole narrative summarizes my stressed present and a scared future in academia. My autoethnographic account corroborates the findings of other qualitative methods (interviews and meta-analysis) I used to investigate the precariousness of academic researchers previously. It has deepened the findings from the interview data with more depth and nuance. To sum up, this article has addressed the dynamics of Finnish academia for junior researchers by highlighting the alienation caused by the Finnish higher education policies. By reflecting on my experience, I analyzed that academia is just like a factory without walls and academic work is labor. Neoliberal universities and capitalist policies by the state subjugate academic freedom. This type of alienation is found between the academic work and the researcher, between the process of producing research outputs and the researchers, between the researcher and their passion for doing joyful work i.e., research and being with co-researchers. Thus, to counter this alienation of neoliberal academia, researchers need to recognize the power of their personal agency to bring change by being responsible and ethical in their research.

They: We are trying to attract talent here and you are portraying yourself as a victim of oppression stranded in Finland. How will this help? Also, be mindful that by publishing this narrative, you will burn bridges in Finnish academia.

I: I am not playing a victim card here as I mentioned earlier that I am too part of this system. If I stay in Finnish academia, I see a very dark future, but I found an answer to the question that 'Who is responsible for this alienation?'. The answer is 'me'. I, as a social sciences researcher and as a human being should care about my current and my future in academia by initiating a radical change instead of becoming a conformist, by learning what 'true freedom' is instead of blindly accepting this 'fear of freedom' in neoliberal education system (Fitzsimmons, 2015). I should resist, rework, and show resilience for change (Katz, 2004). This autoethnography should mark my first step in bringing that social transformation as an active agent. Hence, I am not afraid to burn bridges in Finnish academia.

Research Implications

The key contribution of this autoethnography is to highlight the challenges faced by a migrant scholar in a non-Anglophone country grounded in the Marxist concept of alienation. It demonstrates a unique way of using classical sociological theory to articulate autoethnography. Hence, it advances the literature on how Marxism can be seen penetrating Finnish academia.

Practice Implications

I believe that my autoethnography gives a voice to academics all over the world, especially those with different identities (i.e., women, mothers, international students, early career researchers). My lived experience as a social sciences researcher provides a bridge to facilitate a better understanding of the needs of others in my field. Further, it provides learning insights to the early career researchers about the researcher's vulnerabilities and the unexpected practical, financial and motivational challenges. Finally, it will be a source of empowerment for the students who realize themselves as 'subjects of oppression' (Fitzsimmons, 2015) and undermine their personal agency and ethical responsibility.

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