

‘Too busy for thoughts’: stress, tiredness and finding a home in the university

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Introduction: research and changes of discourse

The ambition of the European Commission’s Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010) for the EU to ‘become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’¹ has been superseded by Horizon 2020’s aim ‘to create smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’ (EU, 2013). This latest work programme is part of the recasting of the European Union as the Innovation Union and has brought about a particular focus on the researcher in European policy. The ‘researcher’ in this context is understood here to refer to a particular subject position, the description of which echoes that of the lifelong learner, the central figure of the Lisbon Strategy; she must be entrepreneurial, adaptable, mobile, etc. But in a subtle change from the figure of the lifelong learner, I argue, for the researcher it is not sufficient to continue to accrue skills and competences. These are not of value in themselves. The researcher is subject to the demands not of learning but of *innovation*. New skills must be accrued, or old skills must be accrued in a *different* way and put to a *different* use to produce a measurable, useful output and create a *distinctive* niche (cf. Hodgson, 2013).

The closer policy focus on research and innovation is seen here to indicate two changes of discourse. The first refers to the activity of the university, or research organisations more generally, and to a longer term change from speaking about *academics and scholarship*, as an assumed part of the activity of the university, to *researchers and research*, as strategic to the distinctive mission of individual higher education institutions or research institutions. The second change relates to the first but refers to more general changes in the self-understanding of the individual today, and that is the governmental shift, referred to above, from *learning to research*. These are interrelated in part by the ways in which the self-understanding of the individual as someone who needs to do research is effected by means of discourses and practices of self-management deriving from psychology and related disciplines (hereafter the psy-disciplines). The shift during the last few decades from the governance of the individual in relation to the normal in the modern state to the self-governance of the individual in terms of autonomous personhood (Rose, 1999, p. 90) has seen all aspects of our lives become the object of the ‘generosity of expertise’ of the psy-disciplines. As Rose suggests: ‘the expertise of

¹ <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/industrialrelations/dictionary/definitions/lisbonstrategy.htm>

subjectivity has proliferated through our experience at a “molecular” level’ (ibid., p. 92). We are asked to take personal responsibility for our mental and physical wellbeing in particular terms, with a view to minimising risk and ensuring optimal outcomes, in the form of economically valuable outputs.

While the language and practices of psychology are the most appropriate means to address certain conditions, the ways in which we are governed today in terms of an individual, psychological self-understanding not only delimits other ways of addressing issues, but makes certain aspects of our lives appear to us as ‘issues’ in the first place. The recourse to the language and practices of psychology in the support material for researchers, for example, is indicative of the wider psychologisation in our self-understanding and self-government (De Vos, 2012). The ways in which researchers are addressed by this material provides the starting point for this analysis.

This chapter is concerned predominantly, then, with the first of these changes of discourse. The ways in which the researcher is asked to take responsibility for her professional and personal development is illustrated by the Researcher Development Framework developed by the UK organisation Vitae. The Framework breaks down the excellent researcher into four quarters of a circle, each consisting in numerous sub-sections that contain particular skills and attributes. Vitae also provides resources to help the researcher to work on these. In the Vitae guidance booklet ‘The Balanced Researcher’,² for example, strategies are offered for managing work-life balance or identifying imbalance (Hodgson, 2014). The guidance booklets provided by Vitae address the researcher who is enterprising, leading, engaging, career-wise, and creative. Such language is indicative of the ways in which the excellent researcher is constituted in terms of specific personal qualities, evidenced through skills, competencies, and outputs, in terms of which she is asked to account for herself and is thereby governed. This is illustrative of the individual skills and outputs-based governance of the researcher and of higher education more generally (see e.g. Shore and Wright, 1999; Simons, 2006).

But to describe one’s self in these terms is to do so in the dominant language of the ‘research profile’. In everyday conversation, the researcher seems more likely to describe herself as tired, stressed, and as dissatisfied with the university (or higher education institution) in (the name of) which she works. It is not the intention here to reveal the ‘real’ person hidden beneath the psychologised subject or to offer an ideal account with which to compare and critique the ‘researcher’ as found in policy and self-management devices. Nor is the critique that is provided

² <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/guides-briefings-and-information/vitae-researcher-booklets>

intended to single out the researcher as a professional who is more subject to stress, tiredness, and general dissatisfaction with conditions than others. Rather, the focus of the critique here is on the ways in which the researcher is asked to understand herself, and the discourses and practices, deriving from psychology, in terms of which she is asked to account for herself. This discourse seems to treat as weaknesses to be overcome aspects of ourselves that seem to characterise the everyday experience of being a researcher: tiredness, stress, and not feeling at home in the university. To do this, the figure of the studier is used as a means to provide critique as it is a figure characteristic of the university *in its specificity* and one defined in terms other than those of the dominant discourse of what it means to be a researcher today. The studier then offers a different way of responding to experiences that seem to characterise the university *as it is today*: namely, of tiredness, stress, and not feeling at home. In the concluding section, indications are given as to how this relates to the second change of discourse identified, that from learner to researcher as the subject position required of us all, not only those involved in research professions.

The tired researcher

In *On Study*, Tyson Lewis invokes Agamben's figure of the studier to reclaim study as a distinctive, educational, aspect of the university. This figure returns in an account of 'the fatigue university' in which tiredness is contrasted with exhaustion in order to explore the educational potential of this rather than addressing it as a shortcoming to be overcome to maximise learning (Lewis, 2013). Tiredness today is an object of concern in the competitive, responsabilised system of which it is a symptom. That is to say, tiredness is not an indication to stop, to do nothing, to rest, to sleep, but is something to measure, to track, to improve. Just as during the working day we can employ devices to ensure that we take regular breaks³ or that track our activity levels to ensure we are doing enough and eating and drinking the right things,⁴ tracking our sleep patterns is now a common response to tiredness. These devices are accompanied by other complementary advice too – cut down on alcohol and caffeine, get some exercise, turn off your devices – but the emphasis is on sleeping more efficiently and effectively: doing it better so you need to do it less.⁵

The current concern with wellbeing has been understood in governmental terms as encouraging a governance of ourselves within safe parameters of health and productivity, and as providing strategies for maintaining these parameters and for intervening when they are put

³ <http://eyeleo.com/>

⁴ <https://jawbone.com/up>

⁵ <http://www.lifehacker.co.uk/2014/03/08/get-better-sleep-need-less-every-night>

at risk (Atkinson and Joyce, 2011; Hodgson, 2010). The booklet provided by Vitae, 'The Balanced Researcher', is an example of this. The authors ask the researcher to visualise activities on a balance, but then in a discrete box in the corner lists 'signs of imbalance': increased stress, worry and frustration, fatigue and health problems, loss of interests and motivation, isolation (Kearns and Gardiner, 2008). These are the states to be avoided, the impediments to productivity, which require the researcher to seek (self-)help.

Tiredness is such a prominent feature of the university and those who work there today that it has been characterised recently as 'the fatigue university' (D'Hoest and Lewis, 2015). As the use of tracking devices and sleep quality improvement practices suggests: 'We cannot avoid tiredness, but, as far as possible, we are expected to avoid its limit: exhaustion. We are educated to avoid exhaustion: we are educated in how to guard some reserve of our energy despite "getting so much out of breath"' (ibid., p. 4). While many respond to this condition of fatigue as a symptom of a more general exploitation, D'Hoest and Lewis explore the educational space opened up by fatigue, in relation to the notions of tiredness and exhaustion, drawing on Agamben and Deleuze (ibid., p. 4).

Tiredness, following Deleuze's account in 'The Exhausted', is understood in relation, in terms of an aim: 'To be tired is to "realize" some sort of potentiality in relation to certain goals, a possibility. Thus when one takes a test in order to measure skill acquisition, one is legitimately tired for one has attempted to realize a possibility' (D'Hoest and Lewis, 2015, p. 7). Tiredness exists in making these choices and in relation to distinctions:

But the realization of the possible always proceeds through exclusion, because it presupposes preferences and goals that vary, forever replacing predecessors. It is these variations, these substitutions, all these exclusive disjunctions (daytime/night-time, going out/staying in...) that are tiring in the end. (Deleuze, 1995, p. 3)

In tiredness there are possibilities, choices, distinctions, and it is of these that we become tired. It is also a condition which we can do something about – sleep – to produce a further outcome – not being tired: we are 'tired by something' (Deleuze, 1995, p. 4).

To be exhausted is quite different. Exhausted is the translation used of Deleuze's 'épuisé', D'Hoest and Lewis write, 'which comes from "puits": a well; "épuiser" literally means "dry up" (D'Hoest and Lewis, 2015, p. 8):

In Spanish, 'exhausted' is 'agotado', which comes from 'gota' (drop): someone who is 'agotado' has no drop left, no water reserve. 'Exhausto' is a synonym of 'agotado':

'exhausto' and 'exhausted' are built with 'ex' and 'haurire', which means 'collect, draw water (haurire) outside (ex)'. (ibid.)

Exhaustion is not a state of choices and distinctions, but of 'preferring not to', to not be oriented towards completion and outputs. D'Hoest and Lewis understand this in terms of Agamben's notion of potentiality:

a suspension of distinctions such as occurrence and non-occurrence, being and not being, in order to keep open a perpetual field of contingent possibilities. The field of contingent possibilities is the precise location of human freedom as the opposite of necessity (something must occur or not occur) and impossibility (something that occurs cannot not occur). (D'Hoest and Lewis, 2015, p. 5)

Both Deleuze and Agamben illustrate this state of potentiality with the figure of Bartleby the Scrivener, who also illustrates the particular educational aspect of Agamben's thought. Studying, for Agamben, is 'an "interminable" activity that not only loses a sense of its own end but, more importantly, "does not even desire one" (Agamben, 1995, p. 64)' (Lewis, 2013, p. 17): 'Thus, studying emerges as a kind of im-potential state of educational being that interrupts any notion of educational "growth" or educational "realization" of wilful self-production...' (Lewis, 2013, p. 17). Following this line, for Lewis exhaustion is the state of the studier (Lewis, 2013). In distinction from the learner, for whom potential or potentiality 'must be actualized over and over again through the learning of skills' (Lewis, 2013, p. 5), the studier is engaged in something without end(s). The figure of the studier then is characterised by the act and experience of studying itself, not defined by any product if it. As Thomas Storme puts it:

To study means to profane learning itself. There is no determined learning outcome, nor is there a conclusion to be drawn. Like play, study cuts ties and forges new ones, mutates relations and tests variations. To study is to put the world and ourselves with it at stake by emancipating it from determinate endings and by sacrificing productivity and marketable end results. We have to write in order to find out what we are writing. *No idea but on to something.* (Storme, 2014, pp. 321-322)

To study is to suspend the logic of outputs and outcomes, but to exist always in potential. This is, in Agamben's terms, potential as im-potentiality, indicating 'the symbiotic relation between potential and impotential' (Lewis, 2013, p. 7): it is not impotence but rather 'an active capability for not-doing or not-being' (ibid.).

On this account, the researcher can indeed be said to be tired: her activity, like the learner, defined in terms of outputs and outcomes, her subjectivity defined in terms of the (measurable and manageable) qualities that produce them - excellence, innovation, mobility, leadership, etc. - and her choosing permanently to continue to do so. The studier, to use Agamben's term, is, by contrast, exhausted. She works in the name of nothing, governed only by the practices internal to it, reading, writing, and thinking. For Lewis, the focus on learning as the capitalization of potential effects a kind of desubjectification. In spite of the emphasis on self-motivation, self-directed action, and self-management, Lewis writes, 'the emphasis on the self within the learning society speaks to an underlying crisis in the very self that is constantly being commanded to self-actualize its latent potentiality' (Lewis, 2013, p. 6).

In other words, desubjectification is a process that insists on the world *as it is* (necessity) and that alternatives *cannot possibly occur* (impossibility). The subject is captured as a resource for the world; his or her choices become nothing more than reflexes of the needs of the world to replicate itself. It is my contention that learning is the first initiation into the rituals of desubjectification. (Lewis, 2013, p. 7)

To refer to learning as desubjectification, then, is to point to the reduction of the individual to a quantity of human capital, a generic skill set, and furthermore, to the individual. One's learning, health, and wellbeing are matters of individual responsibility but to be directed to a specific end: 'alternatives *cannot possibly occur*'.

Tiredness is only one aspect of fatigue; it is often accompanied by stress or anxiety. Like tiredness, stress is a potential threat to productivity and efficiency, and thus is an issue to be addressed by the individual through various interventions. Stress is a condition the researcher must find ways to manage and relieve, as advised in material such as 'The Balanced Researcher'. To some extent, stress and anxiety are permanent conditions. Not (always) states we let ourselves fall victim to due to poor (self-) management but natural responses to the conditions we find ourselves in, the questions the world asks of us, and that we ask of ourselves. This is denied or ignored if we understand stress solely as psychological imbalance in need of coping strategies. To explore a different response in relation to the subject position of the studier we turn now to Thoreau and Cavell.

The stressed researcher beside herself

The logic of learning and research, as discussed so far, is to always produce, to be working towards something, to translate our intentions and activities into an economically valuable

output. To not do so, to not see the point of doing so, or to fail to do so might be accompanied by a sense of despair and hopelessness. These feelings are familiar to the researcher: when the research proposal fails and no funding is obtained; when the application for promotion is unsuccessful because the metrics don't quite make the grade. These are everyday disappointments in the university. But we have no choice but to continue and to do it again, and we become tired of being tired of it. We can alleviate the despair that ensues from the failure of this economy - putting in the work, getting nothing back - by looking on the bright side, seeking consolation from colleagues, accessing professional development, and trying again.

But despair and hopelessness are not only experienced by the tired researcher; they are inherent to the rhythms of the (exhausted) studier, a cycle of gaining and loss, and agony and ecstasy, is characteristic of study. For Cavell, referring to Thoreau's *Walden*: 'Despair and a sense of loss are not static conditions, but goads to our continuous labor' (Cavell, 1992, p. 70). If learning is the accrual of knowledge and skills according to a logic of market value, education entails loss as an inherent condition of my relationship of myself to myself and to the other and the acknowledgement of this very doubleness. This is present in Thoreau's account of thinking and labour:

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent... I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. (Thoreau, 1995/1854, p. 87)

This doubleness is an inherent part of ourselves, a part in which education consists, and a part denied by the desubjectivation of learning. The 'besideness' to which Thoreau refers in 'being beside oneself in a sane sense' is 'my experience of my existence, my knowledge "of myself as a human entity"' (Cavell, 1992, p. 104). This doubleness is:

a relation between ourselves in the aspect of indweller, unconsciously building, and in the aspect of spectator, impartially observing. Unity between these aspects is viewed not as a mutual absorption, but as a perpetual nextness, an act of neighbouring or befriending. (Cavell, 1992, p. 108)

Being 'beside oneself' here is not understood as a lack, as having lost one's mind in a negative sense, but rather as that in which our personhood, our subjectivity, consists. This nextness is maintained, Cavell writes, by new 'capacities for constancy and change' (p. 109). Thus we should resolve 'not to deny either of its positions or attitudes' (ibid.). This entails not only not denying the nextness of the self to the self, but also not denying that that part of me that 'is not part of me, but spectator', may also be you, the other, to which I am always already answerable.

Being beside oneself refers also in older usage to being out of one's wits, to lacking common sense. To be out of one's wits suggests also being at the limit of one's understanding, of something being beyond comprehension, and thus suggests a condition in which the studier finds their place, though they may not settle there. This is not a condition in need of intervention or coping strategies but one inherent to education and to study. The studier then often finds no place in the representation of the researcher, as a quartered circle, subdivided in to lists of skills and attributes, each with its own developmental tools and devices to actualise that aspect of this self. This is not to say that the studier cannot be found, in the university or elsewhere, but perhaps they are not at home there, have not carved out a productive niche, and are more nomadic. Faced with a notion of research and of ourselves as researchers in which we do not see ourselves, that leaves us tired and stressed, we may feel like moving on, like leaving. But then wonder where else we might go. To explore further the notion of leaving, or departure, we turn again to Cavell and his discussion of Thoreau and Heidegger.

Homelessness and working at home

In his essay 'Thoreau thinks of ponds, Heidegger of rivers', Cavell's reading of Heidegger derives predominantly from his *Holderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, the river of the title. Thoreau's pond is Walden Pond, the location of his period of living in a self-made wooden hut that is the subject of his text *Walden, Or Life in the Woods* (1995). Cavell does not read the text, or Thoreau's temporary move from the town to the woodland, as 'a rejection of society in favour of an escape to a life of rural isolation' or as 'the celebration of a kind of individualism' (Standish and Saito, 2005). Instead, Thoreau's stay in the woods is a way of engaging in society by means of a disruption of accepted ways of living within it: it is a refusal 'to live what he will not call his own life' (Cavell, 2005, p. 226). Thoreau's *Walden* is an account of his time spent in the woods in which 'account', along with other terms such as 'interest' and 'spending', relate to a particular meaning of economy. The Greek root of economy, *oikos* - household - is pertinent here; for Thoreau the finding of one's *home* relates closely to finding one's voice, in the sense of the articulation of an *economy of living* or the life he will call his own.

Thoreau's desire to account for himself - through his action and his text - stems from his disappointment with the society he observes around him. In his expression of this, Cavell finds implied the contrast between the pond and the river. Thoreau asks 'Why should we knock under and go with the stream?', which for Cavell refers to the need to 'hurry along with the transitory things others institutionalize as necessities' (p. 224). The rushing stream then provides the image of society so busy with immediate demands, for profit, productivity and material wealth, that man does not think on why he does so, or at least not adequately so. Cavell sees this contrasted by Thoreau's reference to the pond, "the perpetual instilling and drenching of the pond that surrounds us" (pp. 224-5). Thoreau's appeal to this stillness does not, however, refer to a conservatism, but to a particular attention to physical and material conditions.

Instilling and drenching are concepts that articulate the individual's mode of what the writer calls 'apprehending', that is, thinking, and thinking specifically of whatever is culminating in the present. It is when the writer is kneeling alone on the ice (the posture of prayer?) that he shows himself to drink from Walden, that is, to be drenched by it, to receive what it gives to drink. (Cavell, 2005, p. 226)

In contrast to the farming that is the business of his fellow citizens, in which nature appears as a resource to cater for human needs, Thoreau's attention to the pond expresses a humility in relation to nature, but also a stillness of thought, a disciplined contemplation that amounts to an intimate attention to the present, not in the name of a future condition but our constitution here and now.

The pond is a focus in Thoreau's text in relation to building a home, as the river is in Heidegger's thought. Cavell cites Heidegger's saying 'the river determines the dwelling place of human beings upon the earth' (p. 226), recalling Heidegger's detailed elaboration of the relationship of man to the land in 'Building Dwelling Thinking' (Heidegger, 1971). Cavell writes: 'Heidegger of course comments upon Hölderlin's line "For rivers make arable/The land," that is, suit the land for plowing, hence for settling (instead of wandering, as nomads)' (Cavell, 2005, p. 225). The concern with dwelling in Heidegger's thought relates to the relationship of the river to the fate of the German nation: 'Heidegger, in 1942, takes Holderlin's Ister as marking a hopeful, privileged destiny for Germany as well as for the German language' (p. 225). It is in Heidegger's 'taking rivers as "marking the path of a people" (Holderlin's Hymn, p. 31)' (p. 225) that marks the divergence in the understanding of home that emerges in Cavell's reading of the two authors.

In contrast to the river marking the path of a people, a destiny already determined, Thoreau focuses on the perpetual replenishment of the pond. Cavell considers Thoreau's saying "Here I will begin to mine" not only as reference to the preparatory digging of the foundations of his home at Walden Pond but also as 'proposing the verb "to mine" to name the act of making my being mine – my possibilities, my way in the world...' (p. 228). In contrast to the homebound-ness of Heidegger's imagery of the river in relation to the German nation, for Thoreau, being at home, and making my being mine, is referred to in terms of a sojourning, 'living each day, everywhere and nowhere as a task and an event' (p. 229). This implies the finding of home, the labour of mining or making mine, to be a permanent condition; home is not a place we find once and for all or a future destiny. Rather, striving for home entails learning to leave in order that it is refound.

Whereas for Heidegger the achievement of the human requires inhabitation and settlement, for Thoreau it requires abandonment, leaving (Cavell, 1992, p. 138). This act of departure may not be major and dramatic, but mundane; it might be the 'I prefer not to' of Agamben's potentiality, acting not in the name of productivity and outputs, but of thinking and labouring (cf. D'Hoest and Lewis, 2015). For Thoreau, there are possibilities, rather than a path to a destiny; the attention to the present in mining is akin to the attention of the studier. It is not oriented towards an outcome but is a permanent condition, without end. For Lewis, the studier depicts education, rather than learning. The depiction of permanent renewal in Thoreau provides a further critical counterpoint to the outcome-oriented notions of research and innovation according to which the researcher is asked to understand herself.

Conclusion

The discussion of tiredness, stress, and homelessness here has sought to draw attention to aspects of the figure of the studier as a critique of the ways in which the researcher is asked to understand herself in the university today and in particular the way she is asked to address problems of work-load management and work-life balance. This responds to the long term change of discourse relating to the activity and purpose of the university, from scholarship to research, and research outputs more specifically. The figure of the studier is used here as a critical subject position with which to see how the researcher is asked to understand herself, deal with issues, and what should be an issue for her in the first place. This is exemplified in the support literature, such as 'The Balanced Researcher' provided by Vitae.

Rather than critically assessing the language with which the excellent researcher is asked to understand herself directly – as creative, leading, enterprising, etc. – attention here is given to

the everyday language and conditions in which the researcher finds herself – as tired, stressed, not feeling at home. These conditions are used to focus on an activity that marks the distinctiveness of the university (as opposed to the private research lab, for example): study.

The figure of the researcher does not automatically or only find a place in the university today but can be found at work in any number of other places - the museum archive, the pharmaceutical company lab, the think tank, the television production company, for example. To respond to changes in the constitution of the university today in terms of homelessness is not intended to invoke a homesickness (German *heimweh*), that is, a nostalgia (Greek *nostos* returning home, *algos* pain) for a university that no longer exists, based on a romantic notion of the studier or scholar. Rather, to approach this first change of discourse, from study or scholarship to research, in these terms is to seek different ways of relating to and responding to the conditions in which the researcher finds herself. Further, the notion of homelessness in particular draws attention to the second change of discourse identified in the introduction: not only is the figure of the researcher not a subject position distinct to the university, but also it is a subject position in which we are all addressed today. The disposition of the researcher, towards innovation for maximal efficiency, economy, and sustainability is as much required by the parent, the business leader, the farmer, the care worker, the chef. The shift in the discourse of governance from lifelong learning to research and innovation requires that we take responsibility for our self-development not only as individual economic agents in need of knowledge and skills, including the ability to maintain our own health and wellbeing, but also as agents required to find new means of attaining and deploying that knowledge and skills and identifying what knowledge and skills we require.

To understand ourselves in terms of research and innovation then rather than only in terms of learning marks a subtle but important change of discourse. The notions of exhaustion, being beside one's self, and finding a home, elaborated in relation to the studier here, offer notions of perpetual renewal, nextness, and departure that offer a critical contrast to the potentially privatising, domesticating notion of innovation that directs our attention and activity in particular ways to particular ends. If, as Lewis (2013) argues, 'learning is the first initiation into the rituals of desubjectification' (p. 7), then understanding one's self in relation to research and innovation marks a further stage of this. This chapter has offered one perspective on how we might respond to this desubjectification. Further analysis is required on how it is effected and its educational and political implications.

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