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Navigating the Neoliberal maze: South African academics' coping strategies in modern higher education

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Orientation: The invasion of neoliberalism in higher education institutions as an ideology has significantly changed how these institutions are governed. The emergence is primarily aimed at emphasising market-driven and consumerist principles. In turn, it has impacted the academic work environment and academics. A clear example of the impact is the subjection of academics to surveillance processes to promote productivity.

Research purpose: This study aimed to explore the coping strategies academics employ to navigate their academic work environment within this framework of the neoliberal university.

Motivation for the study: Diminutive attention has been given to how academics adapt to and cope with the shift to and the demands of the neoliberal institution. The exploration of their coping strategies provided an in-depth understanding of how they navigate the perceived negative effects they experience in their work environment.

Research approach/design and method: This study employed a cross-sectional, qualitative interpretative phenomenological research design. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of 20 academics. Data were analysed following the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Main findings: The findings revealed that academics mainly rely on five key coping strategies. These strategies centred around social support, active coping, distraction coping, interpersonal communication and religiosity.

Practical/managerial implications: To embrace and sustain the changes in the governance of the modern university, engagement between academics and new management needs to be authentic.

Contribution/value-add: The findings of this study may aid managers in their efforts to address the ideological differences between academia and new management.

Keywords: higher education; neoliberalism; academics; coping; governmentality; surveillance; performance metrics.

Introduction

Globally, much has been written about how neoliberalism has infiltrated the higher education sector, aiming to enhance its effectiveness and efficiency. In the corridors of these institutions, there is a growing concern among academia about how neoliberalism's capitalist strategies grounded in the ideological ideas of profit-making, performance metrics and standardisation have transformed the academic work environment (McKenna, 2020; Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2022).

Highlighted in literature is how the descendance of neoliberalism has created tension and stress for academics. This seems to stem from a shift in how they are being governed that has led to an increase in their workload, intensified levels of control, pressure to perform and expectations for research output (Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009; McKenna, 2020; Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2022).

This article explored the coping strategies employed by academics working in South African higher education institutions to navigate the neoliberal maze and the change in how they are

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being governed. In this study, 'change' is perceived as synonymous with the introduction of neoliberal governance principles.

Research purpose and objectives

As South African higher education institutions underwent transformation, they started reorganising themselves according to neoliberal frameworks. Consequently, new management started to adopt principles of corporatism and managerialism (Dafermos, 2023; Feldman, 2023; McKenna, 2020). This shift incited debate around matters such as academic autonomy, academic freedom and constant change especially how academia adjusted and responded to these changes. Literature revealed a gap in understanding how South African lecturers navigate and cope with the demands of the neoliberal work environment. This study aimed to explore how academics cope within these neoliberal academic work environments and more specifically the strategies they rely on.

Literature review

Neoliberalism has become a dominant ideology in the global higher education sector. Since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a shift towards capitalism that paved the way for the emergence of neoliberalism in higher education (Radice, 2013). Initially, neoliberalism originated in the 1930s as an approach to redress the social and economic challenges after the great depression, calling for a free-market system favouring free individual choices and optimal economic growth (Nofal, 2023). Neoliberalism gained momentum throughout the 1970s and 1980s with at its core knowledge as 'intellectual capital' (Cerro Santamaría, 2020, p. 23).

Harvey (2007) provides a good summary definition of neoliberalism:

> Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by maximising entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterised by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade. The state's role is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (p. 22)

Contextualising neoliberalism within the South African higher education sector

Change and transformation are two dominant discourses in the South African higher education sector. Before 1994, South Africa was fragmented and segregated by race, favouring a privileged minority (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). After apartheid ended in 1994, South African higher education institutions grappled with numerous challenges, such as the redressing of inequalities, a sizeable increase in student numbers, access to funding and addressing efficiency and effectiveness (Bozalek & Boughey, 2020; Mlambo, 2021).

The struggle for liberation from apartheid and the growing complexity that emerged with the call for the democratisation of South African higher education institutions affected all institutional structures (Habib, 2015). In 1995, the National Commission of Higher Education (NCHE) was appointed by President Nelson Mandela. This commission drafted a policy framework for education and training to ensure a cohesive and well-structured national higher education system. Of importance was the national and provincial reconstruction to ensure the development of human resources and the creation of knowledge to facilitate 'the economic, cultural, and intellectual development' of South African communities and the nation (NCHE, 1996, p. 113). The policy framework further highlighted a persistent disconnect between the output of higher education institutions and the demands of the economy. Furthermore, higher education has failed to make a significant contribution to a democratic ethos and a sense of citizenship considered as a commitment to the common good. It continues to be perceived through the lens of teaching and research policies that promote academic narrow-mindedness and closed-system disciplinary programmes (Green Paper, 1996, pp. 3–4).

These neoliberal, nuanced policies influenced the reform of South African higher education institutions, and it can be argued that the first phase of the transformation of higher education institutions in South Africa was to focus on restructuring these institutions with a specific focus on the governance structures. This argument is supported by the Higher Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997), which proposed a new governance structure that is embedded in a cooperative model linked to a form of new management emphasising an alignment between educational outputs with economic needs, particularly focussing on producing graduates with skills for a modernising economy (Hlatshwayo, 2022). One of the first phases of the transformation of higher education institutions in South Africa focussed on the restructuring of these institutions with a specific focus on the governance structures.

However, many of the dominant symbols and ideologies of the former leaders remained intact, which led to intense debates as those who supported neoliberalism called for cooperative governance (Deem & Brehony, 2005). As a result, the suggested cooperation between higher education institutions and the government led to some instances of the government making decisions without consulting institutions. This in turn had far-reaching implications for the institutions, including that they now had conditional autonomy rather than complete autonomy (Cloete, 2016). The controversies that arose from the conflicting ideologies of the government and higher education institutions left academics disgruntled.

Neoliberal governance strategies changing the academic work environment

The traditional higher education institution has always been perceived as a place where concepts such as independence (i.e., self-governance), autonomy and freedom are valued (Levin et al., 2020). For decades, the academic culture favoured collegial self-governance, autonomy and freedom (McKenna, 2020). As the concept of 'academic capitalism' invaded higher education institutions, the academic work

environment was redefined to reflect the changes in governance and management imposed by these neoliberal frameworks. Dafermos (2023, pp. 5–28) refers to this as 'the restructuring of academic labour' or the 'McDonaldization' of higher education.

Little has been reported on how academics experience the descendants of neoliberalism in higher education on a subjective level. Several research studies suggest that the infiltration of neoliberalism into higher education work environments has provoked a great deal of discontent among academia (Feldman, 2023). Other studies pointed out how the heightened expectation of academics to perform, combined with tracking their performance and fostering a competitive culture, is taking a toll on their well-being. In other words, the new forms of governmentality had a negative and disparaging impact on academia's mental well-being (Guthrie et al., 2017; Loveday, 2018; Palafox Carvajal & Domínguez Guedea, 2021).

In the United Kingdom (UK), 126 senior academics published an open letter in *The Guardian* online addressing their Parliamentary Education Committee stating how the regulated governance of academia and the micromanagement are intensifying the pressures on academics. This requires them to operate as small businesses taking care of their expenses and generating profits. They stated that 'highly paid university managers' are driving these initiatives often without a genuine understanding of the teaching and research processes in higher education (Lesnick-Oberstein et al., 2015).

Berg et al. (2016) explored the 'neoliberal production of anxiety' in higher education institutions. In their analysis, they discovered that the rise in anxiety among academic staff could be linked to an encouraged competition culture in four northern European countries namely: the Netherlands, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and the UK. Horton and Tucker (2014, p. 85) found that academic work environments are often characterised by increased heavy workloads and working in isolation. In addition, academics work long hours while at the same time are under time pressures making it difficult for work-life balance.

Several studies have also reported that academics describe their work environments as coercive and authoritarian and stated how they feel marginalised, alienated, frustrated and sense a loss of control (Chandler et al., 2002; McCarthy et al., 2016, p. 1019). They meant new management did not understand the complexities of the higher education academic work environment, which was the main reason why their workload and administration increased (Brownlee, 2015; Giroux, 2015; Mckenna, 2020; Van Houtum & Van Uden, 2022). Gill (2016), in her work 'Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neoliberal Academia', highlights the intensification and extensification of their workload that caused feelings of anxiety about falling behind with their work.

In their study, Kinman and Jones (2005) found that academics also reported problems with their concentration, disrupted sleep patterns, depression and other stress-related health problems (e.g., high blood pressure, stomach ulcers and migraines). A survey conducted by Shaw (2014) found that senior lecturers between the ages of 55 and 64 years were affected and some of the reasons were that they experienced stress because of a lack of support and unreasonable demands from the management at the higher education institutions:

> It is simply not possible at any one time to research effectively, teach well, deal with endless administrative demands, put in major grant bids, be permanently available to students, mark (often lots of) work, and have some kind of sensible, balanced work-life ratio. (p. 2)

Change and coping

Organisational change linked to the neoliberalised higher education institution and rooted in corporatism and managerial principles, have a significant impact on the professional activities of academics (Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022). The infiltration of these governance principles can be seen as a shift in how these institutions are managed, presenting conflicting powers, creating various tensions and stress for academics. For example, academics experience a diminished agency, increase in workloads, exclusion from decision making processes and as such hindering meaningful contributions to the academic discourse, expecting academics to prioritise profit margins and other targets such as throughput. I argue that viewing higher education institutions as business enterprises directly confronts academics' deep-seated ideological beliefs, which in turn can intensify feelings of stress, anxiety and frustration.

The extent to which an individual is adversely affected by changes introduced in their work environment and how it affects them depends on the coping strategies they tap into. Coping strategies are essential to individuals for managing stress and challenges effectively.

According to Mackay and Pakenham (2011, p. 74), coping can be described as a strategy where the individual makes both a behavioural and a psychological effort to 'overcome, tolerate, reduce, or minimise the impact of stressful events'. This involves cognitive and behavioural efforts (Penley & Tomaka, 2002). Folkman et al. (1986) define coping as:

> An individual constantly changing their cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and internal demands appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources. (p. 993)

Literature (i.e., quantitative and qualitative studies) reports how individuals tap into a repertoire of coping strategies and depending on the situation, select the strategy most applicable (Duhachek & Kelting, 2009).

Folkman and Lazarus (1980) classified coping strategies as problem-focussed or emotion-focussed. For example, problem-focussed coping strategies include active coping, passive coping, active reframing and informational support, while emotion-focussed coping strategies include venting,

acceptance, self-blame and religiosity. According to Zeitlin (1980), coping strategies should be classified as adaptive or maladaptive. Each category has been further divided into primary sub-categories, such as adaptive and maladaptive coping. To dichotomise one strategy over another would mean that individuals value some strategies. In other words, both strategies should be considered to find a balance.

Carver et al. (1989, p. 268) proposed 'dimensions of coping' based on 'specific theoretical arguments about functional – and potentially less functional – properties of coping strategies'. They referred to *active coping* as 'the process of taking active steps to remove or circumvent the stressor or to ameliorate its effects'. This type of coping could be compared to Lazarus's problem-focussed coping strategy but with 'additional distinctions', including:

- Planning: The individual needs to consider what steps to take to handle the problem.
- Constrictions: The individual may choose to suppress involvement in competing activities, which includes avoiding distractions, focussing only on what needs to be done or not giving attention to certain things.
- Restraint: The individual could use this response as an active strategy by waiting for the right moment before they act or as a passive strategy by not acting at all.
- Seeking out social support: The person could seek advice or assistance. Seeking social support for emotional reasons, for example, sympathy or understanding would be more of an emotion-focussed coping strategy (Carver et al., 1989, pp. 268–269).

To date, few qualitative studies, explored the coping strategies academics rely on to cope with the bottom-up corporate governance principles and in all its complexity found in the neoliberal higher education institution.

Research design

Research approach and strategy

A qualitative and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodological approach was identified to explore participants who narrated coping strategies. The three theoretical perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiographic, allowed the researcher to find the balance between the voice of the participants and making sense of their accounts, thus creating new knowledge (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Theoretical perspectives: Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis, underpinned by three theoretical perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiographic was chosen as it allowed the researcher to explore and understand in-depth the coping strategies academics utilise to cope with and navigate the challenges, they experienced in the neoliberal South African higher education work environment. The IPA offered the researcher the freedom of interpretation and the chance to engage with the research question (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Research method

Research setting

This study took place across six public and private higher education institutions in two provinces in South Africa and was applied to academics employed by these higher education institutions. The objective was to explore how academics interpret and experience their academic work environments regardless of their faculty status or age at the higher education institutions where they are employed. The researcher contends that the prevalence of the infiltration of neoliberalism is found at all higher education institutions in South Africa and it impacts all academics. As transformation processes have altered the governance of all higher education institutions in South Africa, it was thus important to include voices from different public and private contexts for a meaningful analysis.

Entrée and researcher roles

This study derived from my doctoral thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at the University of South Africa entitled 'Lecturers' psychosocial experience of change in higher education in South Africa'.

Ethical clearance was secured from the University of South Africa before the researcher initiated the study. Lecturers were contacted individually to explain the nature of the study and seek consent. Permission to audio record the interviews and confidentiality was assured by using pseudonyms and reporting information in a non-identifiable manner.

Research participants and sampling methods

The sampling method was convenient as the researcher had access to participants because of the nature of her position as a teaching and learning developer at a South African higher education institution. Following a purposive sampling technique, the researcher could choose which study participants to include. According to Willig (2013), this is useful for in-depth studies and seeking information-rich cases. A total of 20 participants from two public and four private higher education institutions in two provinces in South Africa were selected. The criteria that guided the sampling parameters for this study were that participants must have lectured actively at a South African higher education institution for at least 2 years. The participant identifiers used are (1) participant number, (2) occupation and (3) age in years.

Data collection method

The data collection method employed was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. One hour face-to-face, interviews were initially scheduled with each of the 20 participants. The research question that guided the study was: 'Which coping strategies do you rely on to cope with your work environment?'.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Reliability and validity are approached differently in qualitative research compared to quantitative research. With

regard to the quality of the chosen analysis method (i.e., IPA), Yardley (2000) provides four broad principles, namely: (1) sensitivity to context, (2) commitment and rigour, (3) transparency and coherence, and (4) importance of the topic being researched. For this study, data obtained from participants were considered with sensitivity and I followed ethical principles such as protecting the anonymity and rights of participants and ensuring that participants willingly gave consent to participate in the study. An intensive engagement with the methodological guidelines and principles when conducting an IPA study addressed commitment and rigour. By thoroughly documenting each step in the thesis, an effort was made to enhance the study's transparency. Of importance to notice is that IPA is inherently subjective and is committed to generating interpretative accounts of experience. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is not interested in the replication of findings as the nature of double hermeneutics suggests that two individual researchers coding the same transcripts are not likely to replicate an analysis conducted by each individual (Smith et al., 2009). Governing higher education institutions in a South African context after 1994 presented many complexities that could not be ignored, such as multiple social realities stemming from historical and cultural contexts. This study drew attention to the significant topic of the lived experiences of academics employed at higher education institutions in South Africa undergoing numerous changes. The importance of this study was that it created awareness around how academics were impacted and coped with the infiltration of neoliberalism into higher education institutions.

Data analysis and interpretation

The IPA is characterised by a commitment to understanding the participant's perspective or focussing on personal meaning-making in particular contexts. The data analysis followed the principles of IPA as described by Smith and Nizza (2022). Firstly, the researcher transcribed each participant's interview verbatim. Secondly, the data were analysed by moving from the parts making sense of the text to the whole. This was followed by an interpretative process during which participants by narrating how they cope made sense of their lived experiences while the researcher tried to make sense of the participants' meaning-making process. This was followed by an iterative process of analysis during which the researcher moved from parts of the text to the whole and back to the parts. Finally, an idiographic approach to each interview transcript was adopted, as in this step the researcher was concerned with the particular rather than the more general (Smith & Nizza, 2022). It is important to note that because of the idiographic nature of IPA studies, smaller numbers of homogenous sampling are perceived as sufficient. In addition, saturation is not part of the typical IPA data collection and analysis process (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Findings and discussion

When things are shifting and changing, a person could feel that certain demands are made of them with which they do not necessarily agree. This, in turn, can cause them to feel threatened and uncertain (Van den Heuvel et al., 2013). In this study, participants' experiences of change as a shift in how they were being governed played out in the stress and tension as they talked about the various coping strategies they relied on. The section presents the coping strategies participants employed to navigate the shift in governance in South African higher education environments. Participants in this study talked about engaging in various coping strategies. In alignment with IPA, as described in Smith and Nizza (2022), the following group experiential themes were identified: (1) social support, (2) active coping, (3) distraction coping, (4) interpersonal communication, and (5) religiosity.

Group experiential theme one: Social support

Social support is considered one of the most successful coping strategies. The concept of social support is often used interchangeably when referring to formal structures, social relationships or their functional content, such as a palpable support system (Drageset, 2021). Social support can be divided into five key areas of support (Krok, 2014) namely:

> [*E*]motional support (e.g., empathy, concern), esteem support (e.g., positive regard, encouraging person), tangible support (e.g., financial or direct assistance), informational support (e.g., advice, feedback), and network support (e.g., welcoming, shared experience) … (p. 66)

Access to social support can buffer the individual against perceived stress and alleviate the stress's effect and impact on them. Thus, protective factors of social support structures could protect an individual from a stressful situation's physiological or psychological impact (Ozbay et al., 2008). At the same time, social support can regulate the effect of life stresses (Song et al., 2011).

Personal experiential theme one: Social support as facilitation

In this personal experiential theme, participants talked about the presence and availability of their family, friends and colleagues and the role they played in supporting them in coping with the changes they experienced in how they were being governed.

This was evident from the following extracts:

> 'To talk about it, to colleagues, family, friends, just to talk about my day.' (Participant 15, lecturer, 33 years)

> 'My family at home, my husband, and my kids, talking to them about my day. At work it is my colleagues.' (Participant 19, lecturer, 30 years)

> 'I have a good network of friends and family. I think it obviously helps talking to them …' (Participant 17, lecturer, 57 years)

> 'My family, motivates me, being there when you need them and then friends as well. They all make it easier trying to figure stuff out….' (Participant 10, lecturer, 33 years)

> 'Family, having a few close friends to talk to, … the biggest part is my family, I can talk to them.' (Participant 19, lecturer, 30 years)

> 'My mother. She might be retired but she is on the phone daily, she is always there, she prays a lot for me like today I would get a message first thing thinking about you what do you need. So, I have that support.' (Participant 14, lecturer, 34 years)

Participants' talk centred around talking to their family, friends and colleagues. Thus, their family, friends and colleagues were a primary source of support and comfort to whom they could regularly speak about their work experiences. What stood out was that when they shared the stress and tension they experienced at their place of work, they were not actively seeking advice from significant others but rather sharing their perceptions, feelings and concerns with them, while others mostly listened. The availability of these social structures seemed to have a buffering effect, which made participants feel supported. In addition, it seemed to regulate and reframe the stress brought on by their experiences at work. It was not so much about participants seeking advice but more about the social companionship and the availability of significant others to listen to them that made them feel supported.

Ozbay et al. (2008) describes social support as the access to and use of individuals, groups or organisations in dealing with life's vicissitudes. Social support allows individuals to freely express themselves by voicing their concerns, discontent and anxiety regarding their experiences (Ozbay et al., 2008). Various studies have made significant progress in exploring the value and aspects of social support as a social concept (Song et al., 2011). Having access to others and spending time with them could reduce stress levels. The underlying assumption is that social support is interpersonal in nature and communal interactions. Being in the presence of significant others and experiencing feelings of belonging could help an individual activate the psychological resources to help them cope with stressors (Song et al., 2011).

Personal experiential theme three: Emotional discharge

In this theme, participants discussed the act of sharing emotions and how they felt about being managed with a corporate lens to alleviate negative feelings they experienced regarding the change. They described how they turned to family, friends and colleagues to vent their frustration and negative feelings regarding the challenges they experienced in the neoliberal work environment. The following extracts evidence the intenseness of their frustration and disillusionment:

> 'The husband, there is a lot of crying on the kitchen floor, and he is good at going it's okay … comforting me. Then I rely heavily on family for support. they would know that I am not coping with the work situation.' (Participant 1, lecturer, 31 years)

> 'Also, friends and family are extremely important in that sense where I can have a space where I can express my frustration, all my difficulties, having people just there to help and support me in that aspect.' (Participant 2, lecturer, 32 years)

> 'Definitely family and friends, colleagues and social events blowing off steam.' (Participant 12, lecturer, 34 years)

> 'Talk. Talk to your colleagues. Talk to your peers, talk to your friends just as a matter of getting it out of your system or at least talking to somebody else to see it from their perspective and communicate with them.' (Participant 16, lecturer, 39 years)

Participants' reflections signalled that they were not coping well with the way they were being governed and described how they talked about engaging in venting behaviour. It seemed that depending on their family was less about support and more about using them as an emotional crutch. Participant 2 referred to a 'space' where he could disperse of his emotional frustration. Thus, venting to family, friends and colleagues helped them to disperse of bottled-up negative emotions. This aligned with Brown et al. (2005) who suggested that a strategy individuals utilise to cope with stress is to find ways to release negative feelings.

Horobin (1980, p. 121) referred to 'emotional discharge' as a process of dispersing negative emotions in a safe setting that usually entails physical involvement such as crying, shouting and shivering. Parlamis (2012) referred to intrapsychic coping strategies representing 'venting'. Venting to significant sympathetic others helped participants disperse bottled-up negative emotions that supported the regulation of emotions. Extant literature supported this finding that venting to others could be an adaptational activity that can assist an individual in coping better psychologically (Behfar et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2005; Bushman, 2002; Parlamis, 2012).

Group experiential theme two: Active coping

Active coping strategies are intentional actions and behaviours individuals utilise to manage stressful situations. These strategies mainly focus on facing and mitigating the challenging situation (Gaudreau, 2018). The strategy involves both behavioural and cognitive processes that aim to reduce the stress deriving from the situation (Freire et al., 2020). Active coping strategies are self-driven, where the individual takes control, looking to action alternatives or a variety of strategies to manage the outcome and thus reduce the stress they experience (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016). This group experiential theme reflected the active steps participants took to help mediate the effects of the stress they experienced because of the change.

Personal experiential theme one: Proactive coping planning and pre-empting

In this personal experiential theme, participants' talk centred on how they engaged in planning and pre-empting as active problem-solving coping strategies. They talked about how planning and pre-empting supported their objective of staying abreast of what was expected of them in the demanding neoliberal environment. They explained that anticipating future challenges enabled them to navigate the unknown, providing them with a feeling of control thus, restoring a sense of autonomy over their circumstances:

> 'Going into super organising mode. I get a little bit obsessive about lists because I am so overwhelmed and over-worked that I usually create to-do lists [*showing me an example of her lists*].

> Creating my little to-do list, usually it works very well for me because it helps me to prioritise …' (Participant 1, lecturer, 31 years)
>
> 'I try to plan everything making sure that everything I can do today I fix so if something happens tomorrow that I might not be able to come in or I get stuck in traffic, or something happens, that it's not as bad as it would've been. So, I try to make sure …' (Participant 10, lecturer, 33 years)
>
> 'I think five steps ahead, not just one step ahead, I observe what goes on. that is my, I'll look one or two steps ahead, I pre-empt everything.' (Participant 13, lecturer, 29 years)

Participants described relying on being organised, planning and staying ahead. It seemed that their experiences in the neoliberal work environment and the associated expectations induced stress. This stems from a concern of falling behind. Being proactive seemed to alleviate this pressure and support a feeling of having control. This finding aligned with the ideological values of autonomy and freedom found in academia.

Most traditional coping strategies are reactive and aim to address stressful events that have already happened. Proactive coping strategies involve approaches aimed at neutralising future stressors. It has a self-regulatory function built into it as the individual integrates processes to manage their life and environment. Greenglass and Fiksenbaum (2009) identified three key features of proactive coping strategies: planning and prevention coupled with self-regulatory goal attainment, integration of goal attainment through identifying resources and utilising self-regulatory goal attainment. Sniehotta et al. (2005, p. 566) described planning as '… a prospective self-regulatory strategy, a mental simulation of linking concrete responses to future situations'. This coping strategy allowed the individuals to adapt their behaviour and attitude towards the shift in how they were being governed. It prepares participants to deal with the unknown, restoring their power and control and, thus, their autonomy over a situation.

Group experiential theme two: Distraction coping

'Distraction is an emotion regulation strategy that has an ambiguous status within cognitive-behaviour therapy' (Wolgast & Lundh, 2016, p. 117). Skinner et al. (2003) postulated that distraction coping is an accommodative coping strategy where the individual adjusts their behaviour and thinking to reduce stress. A general definition offered to capture the essence of distraction coping is that it refers to strategies an individual employs to disengage from a stressor and redirect their attention to something else or something more pleasurable (Traeger, 2020). This group's experiential theme revealed and contextualised how participants talked about using distraction coping as a strategy.

Personal experiential theme one: Positive distraction

Participants in this study presented a repertoire of positive distraction coping strategies. Their descriptions implied they engaged in exercise, boxing, yoga, meditation and listening to loud music. All of them explained that they engaged in these activities as it helped release feelings of frustration, they experienced in their work environment:

> 'I exercise. Physical exercise helps a lot because you get to build up endorphins …' (Participant 2, lecturer, 32 years)
>
> 'I also have a boxing bag, well I don't do it for stress, but I do it for fun, but I think that also helps. To some extent you get rid of the frustration.' (Participant 3, lecturer, 31 years)
>
> 'I like doing yoga and walking. I think that helps me a lot and I like doing meditation that helps me a lot and I love to drink tea. So that is my time, like a time out.' (Participant 4, lecturer, 46 years)
>
> 'I normally cope with humour. Some people get aggressive, and some people will start arguments, not me, I cope with humour.' (Participant 8, lecturer, 30 years)
>
> 'I would put on the loudest rock music, hard core metal, whatever you could find because that person was screaming on my behalf, so I became calm. I don't know how to explain it but with that music I became calm. I would put it on so that I could be calm to do my work.' (Participant 19, lecturer, 30 years)

Participant 2 explained that he engaged in physical exercise, which supports the release of an increase of endorphins. Participant 3 talked about his '… boxing bag …' and stated that it was for '… fun …' and admitted that he used the boxing bag to help him to release feelings of frustration. Participant 4 explained that she engaged in physical activities to reduce her stress and talked about engaging in meditation.

Positive distraction has been described as the engagement in activities to distract individuals' attention from the stressor and is perceived as an adaptive coping strategy (Waugh et al., 2020).

Sheppes and Gross (2011) found that individuals engaged in positive distraction coping strategies because it allowed them to temporarily take a break from the stressor and serve as an emotion regulator. This finding was consistent with what was reported in the literature: that engaging in positive distraction coping strategies was linked positively to reducing negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety. Leisure coping literature confirmed this finding and reported that positive distraction could increase positive emotional outcomes and improve coping self-efficacy (Kim & McKenzie, 2014; Zawadzki et al., 2015). Liu (2015) reported that exercise could improve negative emotions such as depression, anxiety and frustration.

Personal experiential theme two: Avoidance distraction

Some studies reported that distraction coping could be a positive adaptive strategy with a positive connotation to psychological adjustment (Bushman, 2002; Kohl et al., 2013). Thus, when an individual employs a coping strategy by disengaging from the stressor and diverting their attention to something more pleasurable, it is perceived as a positive adaptive coping strategy. However, when an individual

disengages from coping and the stressor, it is perceived as an avoidance coping strategy that is maladaptive (Connor-Smith et al., 2000).

In this theme, two participants described engaging in avoidance coping strategies to actively avoid the stressors:

> 'I just ignore it. I know it's silly, but I just go my own way …' (Participant 3, lecturer, 31 years)

> 'I put myself on auto pilot, just keep yourself busy, because if you think about the change and the problems that come with it, it affects you. Avoiding and withdrawing. Trying to avoid anything that causes more stress.' (Participant 20, lecturer, 37 years)

Participant 3 revealed that he ignored the changes linked to the shift in how academics were being managed in the neoliberal environment. He explained that he did not care for the change and wanted to avoid the reality and impact of the changes. He used the word '… silly …' to acknowledge that this strategy was pointless, which could be interpreted as maladaptive. Participant 20 explained how she coped by keeping herself busy. Talking about keeping herself busy seemed to be an avoidance distraction coping strategy. She acknowledged that she did not want to deal with the realities of the changes. This may imply that she desired to completely avoid having to deal with stressors as she already struggled to cope with existing stressors she was experienced in her life.

In their study, Shoss et al. (2016) positively linked avoidance-orientated coping strategies to feelings of powerlessness. It has been suggested that in the long term, it is maladaptive as it leads to disengagement (Deci et al., 2016). These strategies included behaviours such as ignoring, denying or distancing oneself from the stressor (Pickens et al., 2019). Avoidance distraction coping involves attempting to manage the consequences of a stressor by disengaging from problems as a result of stressful experiences. This can be beneficial but only in the short term.

Group experiential theme three: Intrapersonal coping

A growing body of empirical research corroborated the assertion that internal monologues (dialogue) supported the psychological well-being of individuals (Latinjak et al., 2019; Oleś et al., 2020). Researchers also referred to intrapersonal communication, which encapsulated two types of intrapersonal communication: self-talk and internal dialogue (Oleś et al., 2020). Talking to oneself aloud or internally has been defined as an internal dialogue in which individuals interpret feelings and perceptions, regulate and change evaluations and cognitions, and give themselves instructions and reinforcement (Theodorakis et al., 2008). Most individuals engage in inner dialogues at some point in their lives and may differ in how they engage.

Personal experiential theme one: Inner voice

Self-talk is 'self-directed speech that serves various regulatory and self-regulatory functions' (Brinthaupt, 2019). Self-talk could be just one word an individual speaks to themself. In this group, experiential theme participants relied on internal dialogue and self-talk to regulate and negate their negative feelings and cognitions about the way they were being governed under the banner of the neoliberalism (i.e., negative thought patterns). This theme revealed that two participants engaged in self-talk to regulate their emotions and thought patterns:

> 'I also have a very loud internal voice but that very loud and that voice is a coach with a whip in the hand that drives everything, but it is a positive coach because it tells you good job, so that voice support me most because I have massive internal conversations.' (Participant 1, lecturer, 31 years)

> 'I also think it is literally pep talking yourself, it like … helps you to accept the change. It is definitely your own mind set. I think how you kind of motivate yourself, being positive about it.' (Participant 6, lecturer, 35 years)

Participant 1 described how she had a 'very loud internal voice'. She used the metaphor '… a coach with a whip in the hand that drives everything …' and '… it is a positive coach because it tells you good job …' Personifying her inner voice, she presented a simulation of a coach with whom she had conversations and who steered her towards positive feelings and thoughts. She continued to explain how engaging with this voice made her feel encouraged and supported. This inner dialogue appeared to function as a regulator of the emotions and thoughts she was experiencing. Participant 6 engaged in self-talk as a self-motivational strategy, which seemed to help her to reframe her thinking.

In his analyses of Fyodor Dostoevsky's literary works, Bakhtin (2013) illustrated how by engaging in self-talk, an individual can split the self into different voices that can communicate back, pose questions and answers. Hermans (2012, p. 8) referred to the '… dialogical self …' as '… the society of the mind…' in which the inner voice of the individual takes on various character roles and interacts with one another, allowing the individual to position and reposition themselves. As the 'different characters' interact, agreements are made, negotiation takes place and information is shared. They also provided a valuable understanding of the value of self-talk as a coping mechanism that could aid in regulating emotions and actively direct the person to reframe thought patterns when faced with a stressful situation.

Group experiential theme four: Religiosity

Cotton et al. (2006, p. 55) refer to religiosity and define it as both formal, institutional beliefs and sets of values or informal acts and behaviours of religious participation such as prayer, religious service attendance and meditation. Personal faith and religion have been well-documented as coping strategies. Koenig et al. (1998, p. 513) defined religious coping as 'the use of religious beliefs or behaviours to facilitate problem-solving and to prevent or alleviate the negative emotional consequences of stressful life circumstances'. Religious coping has been described and

categorised as a multidimensional construct such as religious social support, a self-directed coping strategy, a deferring strategy, a collaborative strategy and high-order factors such as denial coping (Hastings et al., 2005; Nooney & Woodrum, 2002; Winter et al., 2009). Pargament et al. (2000, pp. 519–543) refer to the five key functions related to religious coping. These include the search for meaning or purpose, the search for control of situations, the search for comfort, intimacy, social integration and life transformation. A key finding in this theme was how participants' attachment to and belief in God gave them a sense of security and strength.

Religion as attachment belief

Reviewed studies have reported on and have identified a link between attachment beliefs and religion (Belavich & Pargament 2002; Schottenbauer et al., 2006). What was highlighted in these studies was how adverse life events activated attachment behaviour, such as praying to God and the conceptualisation of religion as a shield. In this theme, participants described how God was the centre of their existence and how their lives would fall apart if they did not have Him in their lives:

> 'My relationship with the Lord, that's the number one. I must be honest with you that if it was not for that a lot of the things in my life would not be possible. It will literally fall into pieces or crumble at work. Some of the nonsense you have to deal with there [*umm*] It is just something wonderful that you can come home to the Lord … the Lord is in you and that you have that refuge. Whenever things get too much you have that refuge where you can just flee for rest again.' (Participant 3, lecturer, 31 years)

> 'I prayed a lot and then at the end of the day you just realise you got through this day. I know it is not an academic answer, but prayer helped me a lot. I found inner strength …' (Participant 9, lecturer, 56 years)

> 'I think my faith is the biggest internal factor that I have. If I did not have Jesus Christ as my Saviour, I can run to Him in every crisis because being hopeless that is not good, I think that's the reason why I always have hope.' (Participant 14, lecturer, 34 years)

> 'Being able to pray that is a big thing for me. I do not think without it I would survive.' (Participant 19, lecturer, 30 years)

I chose to explore religion as a coping strategy formulated against the theoretical framework of the attachment theory. Granqvist et al. (2012, p. 36) identifies four criteria linked to attachment relationship, (1) proximity maintenance, (2) a haven, (3) secure base, and (4) separation distress. The first criterion, proximity maintenance, referred to how an individual (i.e., infants) engaged in proximity-seeking behaviour such as vocalising or crying to form an attachment with their carer and maintain the attachment. In this theme, proximity maintenance was highlighted in the texts of all the participants who relied on religion as a coping strategy. They talked about praying (i.e., contact-seeking behaviour, seeking to be closer to God) and experiences of God living in them. Religion as an attachment belief demonstrated how participants attached themselves to a figure, they perceived they could trust and care for, especially when experiencing uncertainty and insecurity (Granqvist, 2020).

The second and third criteria, haven and secure base refer to a place of security from where the individual (i.e., infant) can explore knowing that the carer is close by to protect them, comfort them and reassure them (Granqvist, 2020). Ainsworth et al. (2015) also postulated that individuals would turn to attachment figures for safety and security. Participants described how God was omnipresent and a refuge to them in this theme. One participant said, '… it is just something wonderful that you can come home to the Lord …'. In other words, the relationship between the participants and God as the attachment figure created a feeling of trust, being secure and safe; thus, God or the presence of God shielded and protected them from adversities. This finding aligned with a reviewed study by Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990), who postulated that individuals who believed in God perceived God as a powerful source of support. It is also possible that if an individual experiences feeling threatened or insecure, it will reinforce them to seek access to a secure base (Granqvist et al., 2012). The fourth criterion, separation distress, refers to negative emotions similar to the separation anxiety young children experience when separated from their attachment figure (Granqvist, 2020).

Limitations and recommendations

The following limitations are highlighted for this study: firstly, the participants represented only a segment of actively teaching and research lecturers at two public and four private South African higher education institutions across two provinces. As such, the study was limited to academics' experiences of the change in the governmentality of the neoliberal work environment. Furthermore, the researcher acknowledges that experiences of academics at a South African public higher education institution could be different from academics employed at a South African private higher education institution. Secondly, the aim of the study was not to differentiate the academic in terms of age, gender and race; however, the sampling method resulted in more females and white participants between the ages of 28 and 56 years participating, which resulted in the underrepresentation of other age groups, male and black voices. Thirdly, the historical context in which this study is socially situated yielded rich textual data for analysis, but at the same time, increased the complexity as multiple social realities made the exploration and interpretation of the experiences of participants challenging. Fourthly, the responses gathered from participants were limited to a single observation of academics' lived experiences framed in a particular moment, excluding the broader context. As a result, the study's representativeness cannot be assured. Additional follow-up interviews with participants may have been useful in unpacking some of their constructions more extensively.

Contributions and recommendations

This study highlighted the role that neoliberalism plays in the social context of South African higher education institutions and the changes linked to this that are being

experienced by academics. With the focus on how academics navigate and cope in the mentioned context, a key contribution this study makes that sets it aside from other studies, is the qualitative and interpretive nature it employed to explore and gain insight into the lived experiences of academics working at both public and private South African higher education institutions. Many research studies employ quantitative approaches to examine coping strategies in the workplace. Thus, this study addressed an existing gap and provided a unique interpretive insight contributing to the body of literature regarding how South African academics cope in the neoliberal context.

McKenna (2020, p. 88) states that 'no university works in isolation of the bigger context' Thus, the suggested resolution to bridge the challenges linked to the shift in governance would be to develop a work environment where there was mutual understanding and acceptance of the dynamics of the changes (i.e., corporatisation of higher education institutions). Understanding how the layering of the changes in governance has impacted the role and functions of academics and which strategies they rely on to cope may translate into practices and policies that can help alleviate expected negative experiences and responses. In addition, the findings in this study underline the importance of further research focussing on coping strategies of academics and various aspects of neoliberalism, (i.e., inequality, performance control and encouraged competition) to determine which aspect most significantly impacts their mental well-being.

Conclusion

A key aspect highlighted by the participants throughout this study was the shift towards a neoliberal work environment that relied on ideological principles such as profit-driven surveillance and performance-driven practices. What stood out was the participants' perception of their academic autonomy and freedom in crisis. Participants' descriptions of their lived experiences reveal that the rise of neoliberalism led to an increase in workloads, extended hours and intense time pressures. This shift also led them to experience subjection to increased control and performance management, which caused them to feel pressured, anxious, frustrated and discontent.

Coping is a critical process in alleviating and managing stress. The findings in this study provide a deeper understanding of the various coping strategies academics rely on. What stood out was that participants mainly relied on adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support and active coping strategies, and distractive coping strategies, such as focussing on something positive or avoidance. According to Prati and Pietrantoni (2009, pp. 364–366), adaptive coping is considered a sign of effective coping because it potentially leads to positive long-term adjustment. This statement resonates with this study as participants' descriptions suggest that these strategies helped reduce their stress and aided them in navigating the neoliberal higher education work environment.

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Competing interests

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Author's contributions

The author declares that she is the sole author of this research article.

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The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, N.v.V. upon reasonable request.

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