Caring About the Unequal Effects of the Pandemic: What Feminism, Art, and Activism Can Teach Us

In lockdown with my inner saboteur: A collaborative collage on self-compassion

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Abstract
Dear reader, we are writing this piece as a collaborative collage based on our experience of our ongoing PhD journey in a “top” business school, on self-compassion and the inner saboteur, all saturated by the unpredictable developments of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to the linear argumentation of academic writing, collage writing works by opening up "new possibilities for understanding" what is written (Herrmann, 2020, p. 298). This introduction is where we manage your expectations, by letting you know that what follows below does not replicate the structure or the form of a conventionally organized paper.

KEYWORDS
collaborative collage, Covid-19, PhD journey, self-compassion, writing differently

Scholars have theorized the ways in which the neoliberal university supports disembodied ways of working and learning dictated by hurried productivity, individuality, the instrumentalization of passion, and disregard for care (Ashcraft, 2017; Dey & Steyaert, 2007; Fotaki & Harding, 2017; Fotaki et al., 2017; Gill, 2016; Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Lund & Tienari, 2019; Smith & Ulus, 2019). To take into account what “sits outside the dominant finite games of the university” (Harré et al., 2017, p. 6), feminist and critical scholars have shown ways to foster embodied reflection, such as slow thinking (Jones, 2018; O’Neill, 2014), engaging in self-care (Hurd & Singh, 2020), bringing empathy into academics’ way of working (Oliver, 2010; Prasad, 2013) and “writing differently” (Fotaki et al., 2014; Gilmore et al., 2019; Katila et al., 2019; Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018; Pullen, 2018). These practices promote and nurture relational ways of knowing within the university, aimed not at competing against others to “win,” but rather at inviting others in by supporting the flourishing of individuals and communities (Harré et al., 2017). Furthermore, such practices create...
spaces for resistance, difference, and multiplicity that have political and ethical intent since the ways in which we articulate ourselves “have a direct influence on who we become” (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 4). Hence, feminist scholars have pointed out that theorizing may lead to healing if we depart from our lived experience as a way of “making sense of what is happening around, and to us” thus leading to self-recovery and collective liberation (in Bell et al., 2020, p. 9; hooks, 1991). All in all, approaching academic work as an embodied practice challenges the disembodied masculine traditions of scholarly knowledge production.

If this was a conventional paper, here we would write “however, we know little about...” and proceed with a research question, followed by paragraphs on the empirical case and methodology. Finally, we would enlist the main contributions. Instead, here we join others in writing differently (Fotaki et al., 2014; Gilmore et al., 2019; Helin, 2019; Katila, 2019; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2020; O’Shea, 2019; Prasad, 2016; Pullen, 2018; Pullen et al., 2020; van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019) to elucidate our embodied ways of processing struggles and pressures during our PhD journey in a neoliberal university, with the added tensions that emerged during times of social isolation and global crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Einola et al., 2020; Mandalaki, 2020, 2021; Mandalaki & Daou, 2020; Plotnikof et al., 2020). We do this by developing a collaborative, dialogical collage of prose and poetry (Meldgaard-Kjær & van Amsterdam, 2020) “for each other and with each other” (Ahonen et al., 2020, p. 448) around our feelings of shame (Beavan, 2019) and self-criticism.

The creative method of collaborative collage opens up possibilities for understanding experiences in a social setting while playing with the rhythm of the text, without attempting to produce a linear representation of our argument (Elbow, 1997). Collage follows the esthetic principle of “putting things together,” where “they need to ‘go’,” in conjunction, “but not too well” (Elbow, 1997, p. 26). This provocation to our (academic) selves (Kinnunen, Wallenius-Korkalo, & Rantala, 2021) allows us to embrace messy, dirty and uncomplete writing (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008) by skipping what might be hard, letting go of unity (Elbow, 1997, p. 31), and enabling random associations even when it feels like unfinished writing or cheating. Hence the method is by its very nature unpredictable, requires the reader to interpret, reflect, and question the narrative (Kilgard, 2009; in; Meldgaard-Kjær & van Amsterdam, 2020), and calls for letting one’s self open, to be led, to “touch, and be touched” (Mandalaki, 2021, p. 9).

The process of collaging became a way we, the first two authors, articulated our experiences of what happened during the year 2020, first to each other and now to you, our reader. In particular, we wrote in a dialogic way to explicitly “open up” about “something we might not have been able to utter otherwise” (Helin, 2019, p. 12) by listening into what we “bodily know” (Helin, 2013). We wrote as a way to “uncensor” our sensing bodies (Mandalaki, 2021; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2021; van Amsterdam, 2020) as we investigated the episode of participating and organizing a group called “Becoming in Academia,” and the effect it had on us in the months that followed. The group was initiated by the first and third author, to explore our paths as PhD students collectively through artistic methods, and as a response to not being able to find spaces in our university context to do that. We decided to convene a group drawing on the expertise of the third author as a trainer, coach, and facilitator, and the first author as a designer. Fourteen students from various fields joined the research, among them the second author, whose autoethnographical approach toward research on identity work and otherness motivated this dialogical piece.

The original plan of “Becoming in Academia” consisted of workshop sessions to explore topics that the participants would agree upon together. This plan was suddenly disrupted by the need to distance socially, and instead of benefiting from embodied methods enacted with others in person, we deployed storytelling, metaphorical descriptions, and other activities through remote connection. The group became a safe space where the unexpected isolation and sense of uncertainty could be shared differently than in other academic spaces by “suspending momentary professional norms we often perform and reproduce.” The exchanges in the group triggered in us, the writers, a need to further explore the tensions and experiences around topics such as empathy, motivation, personal paths, boundaries, and uncertainty, and to reflect them against the context of a neoliberal business school. We, the first two authors, crafted this paper together as a manifestation of collective vulnerable and relational way of knowing (Meriläinen et al., 2022) with the third author joining as a dialogic co-thinker and commentator (Sambrook & Doloriert, 2020). Even if the process became a source of important knowledge (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020), we do not
suggest that this is an enlightened account where we have fully learned our lesson (O’Shea, 2018, 2019) or that we’d be incapable of making the “same mistakes” all over again. As we revisited our embodied experience, the narrative and poetic extracts of this collage emerged as an entangled relationship that we present through five parts: the inner saboteur, shame, self-compassion, dialogic writing as an empathic practice, and after-thoughts.

Here we demonstrate the relationship between the mean internal authority we call “inner saboteur” and our self-perceived (un)productivity:

1 | THE INNER SABOTEUR

I should accept the fact that the global crisis is very much “organizing” my academic experience. The pandemic started six months after I began my doctoral studies: new country, new language, new community of potential collaborators, friends, and colleagues. But now it’s an ongoing post-new-normal.

I have lived with my rose-colored glasses on for years of my adult life, often ignoring my inner saboteur, an internal authority, telling me I’m not good enough, and what I’m doing is not sufficient. So, when the pandemic pushed the Pause Button for everything happening for me and around me, the uneasy feelings of loss of control, sensations of uncertainty, and a sudden need for validation appeared. I was slowly being awakened to an unpleasant outlook regarding my professional and social life, of lacking control.

If I can’t prove my worth by achieving, then how?
Where will the validation come from?
If I can’t run toward something fast enough, the inner saboteur will catch me!

My inner saboteur, the mean voice in my head, can’t be ignored. It shouts you’re not good enough. When I run fast and keep busy, I can pretend not to hear it. But I am tired of playing the game. Exhausted of seeking validation from the never-happy, inner mean voice. I don’t even fully understand its expectations. Oh, poor petty you, boooo. It’s me versus me. Is this about fear of failure? An ongoing inner humiliation. It feels cruel and cold inside.

Can we call it for what it is?
Violence.
I need to call the truce.
Give me a break (wo)man.
GIVE YOURSELF a break.

I’m not the captain of this ship, nor the king of the sea;
I sink, much like my voice when I try to denote my struggles;
I am aware of the painful loss of control, over myself, my work, my time.

But I can’t do anything.
I need to go from A, straight to B. It’s the right way.
But what if I don’t know what B is, or where?
For sure it’s somewhere, but am I able to stop elsewhere on the way? perhaps C?
The “Becoming in Academia” group paved a way for me to better face my internal violence; I could hear the internal voice, even from a distance. The relational aspect, concretely being listened to and able to share, sheds light on how normalized that mean voice is in my behavior. And being with this group of people, as I was disclosing personal things, made me feel held. I felt that together we could explore those inner demonic voices, our own versions of that authority. We did not expect to “get better” or to “fix” something, rather, uncovering our inner saboteurs was enough, to hear what they had to say. Our sessions would last a couple of hours at a time, during which I didn’t have to be alone with my inner abuser. And I didn’t have to pretend that I was not in this abusive relationship. Afterward, I felt lighter and tired.

I think this previously unnoticed relationship between me, and the internal sabotaging authority, was perhaps why I felt so dependent on other people’s validation. Although the internal voice kept denying my need, the voices of our peers formed a (temporary) shield between me and that voice. That collective, affective, and discursive shield softened the blow to tell my inner saboteur that I understand their concern, but at that moment, I do NOT share the same concern. Thanks for sharing. I hear you. I’ll catch up with you later. Just knowing that someone in our group related to my narrative, understood the messiness of the emotions, and mirrored them back to me in a new way, brought peace and calm. A pitstop in the middle of endless games. An oasis of care.

It was fascinating to hear from others, to perceive how their stories about their lives as PhD students materialized the unclarity. “Work” and “PhD” entangled with our personal relations. The ones that were living alone, the ones who shared an apartment with a partner, the ones with kids, the ones with non-humans, whether a cat, a dog, or plants. The tiny squares on my laptop screen became windows to other worlds, to other ways of being, into different realities. And I was a part of that arrangement of windows. My own face looking back at me. There was a moment in particular, when we were sharing how hard and draining the social isolation was: low eyes, heavy silence; but suddenly, a little girl popped up in one of the images and climbed into her mom’s lap. Oh, the affects! Big smiles and hands waving. The atmosphere changed at once. I noticed: THIS IS WHAT GIVES ME ENERGY. Yes, the discussions were important and meaningful, but the fact that these people allowed me in their houses, through these small openings on the screen; they welcomed me and enabled little, awesome things to leak in our otherwise structured work as a group.

I actively started looking out for these effervescent tiny details every day. Reprioritizing, I started feeding birds and learning their names, painting and sending postcards, actively looking to hang out with the humans I like, planting seeds, watering plants, noticing the dogs in my neighborhood... Is this (self) care? It is mundane, playful, childish, and even silly. And it’s happening right now.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shall we collage?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>with images, words, objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assemblages, entanglements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alone, together</td>
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<tr>
<td>the inner saboteur is invited to join</td>
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<tr>
<td>possibilities and no mistakes</td>
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<tr>
<td>the process as a product</td>
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<tr>
<td>do-try-move-cut-arrange</td>
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<tr>
<td>and rearrange</td>
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<tr>
<td>creative energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>feel it moving the inner saboteur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who shrugs my shoulders, sinks my chest</td>
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<tr>
<td>scoffs not good enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my throat closes in a knot</td>
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<tr>
<td>choking any expression</td>
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<tr>
<td>collage, collage, no mistakes, only possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my stomach still jumps in excitement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my neck stretches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
creative energy moves my hands
fear and wonder
a dance

***

I read the news, terrible ongoing news.
The inner saboteur feeds into the chaos.
I try to get the idea out of my head by reading another paper.
Do not let the anxieties and fears rise.
We are ok
But more than two million families are not.
Am I ok?
I open our shared file and I write these words to you.
Are you ok?

***

1.1 Me not being as productive as before is not my personal failure?

During the lockdown, we continued organizing the “Becoming in academia” workshops; feeling accountable and responsible toward my co-researcher and the participants made me push myself. Otherwise, the feelings of uncertainty and despair may have paralyzed me. The dread of not being good enough, or professional enough, kept me responding to emails and planning sessions.

Am I able to finish and defend my thesis in four years?
Do I have the required resilience?

Am I measuring myself against an ideal (academic) worker who performs their chosen career with passion and energy? And keeps up the good work in spite of whatever crisis? I have internalized expectations to measure myself against, as feeling “sick, distressed, demotivated, disengaged” (Dale & Burrell, 2014, p. 162) makes me fear of not being good enough for this profession. What if they find out? I read about how feelings of individual failure may lead to further distress and isolation, and prevent experiencing belonging to a collective, thus hindering the possibility of solidarity (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). This idea was very tangible, when I could finally voice these internal anxieties with and to others in our group. I stopped performing my role as an observant-researcher and participated as just another peer. In a group discussion, I disclosed my lack of motivation and the vicious circle of shame. I shared my frustration about being unproductive. The others mirrored back what I expressed through my speech, emotions, metaphors, and body. The exchange made me feel vulnerable. I felt seen.

The inner voice hisses
You shared too much. Shame on you.

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The inner saboteur triggers shame, and a need to disrupt it emerges:

2 SHAME

Shame is physical, it's felt in the body as "intense and painful." Sara (Ahmed) notes that guilt is about a behavior qualified as bad, something that requires action, like punishment. In shame, the “the badness of an action is transferred to me” and my inherent integrity is questioned (Ahmed, 2014, p. 105). Shame is the burning feeling of self-negation while being
exposed to others. Hence, when I feel "I'm bad" in me, I must reject it, reject the self. I am measuring myself against ideals learned in encounters with others. Such idealization regulates my behavior since I desire to belong to a community.

When I fail to approximate to such ideals, I feel shame.

*It's a vicious circle of desiring to belong – failing – feeling shame.*

***

How to disrupt the shame?

A social temporal space to engage different with the self-negation.

How to cross the stream of self-criticism without drowning?

Bridges emerge by relating to others through empathy.

We stand mutually vulnerable.

We meet in-between.

A path to connect to myself.

This enables me to acknowledge my (toxic) relationship with productivity.

Maybe it is possible for me to disengage from (re)producing this violence against myself?

I'm not alone!

Uncovering the mirage of "straightforwardly going from A to B to C": exposing us to the messy, complex reality. How can we hold space for these uncertain and uncomfortable emotions?

Why do we expect ourselves to perform straightforwardly?

**IF LIFE DOES NOT WORK LIKE THAT**

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**Belief: an established adult is productive and in control**

*The unrealistic (egoistic) expectation: the pandemic won't affect my productivity*

*Not living up to promises of an ideal employee. Failing the Game hard.*

Always aiming for maximum productivity narrows down my view on the surrounding world and all its wonderful opportunities. So, experiencing care, sharing, being listened to, and companionship in this cold business school environment, especially during the time of social isolation, dispelled some of my shame for not being at my best.

Even though I was sitting in the same spot every day, in my shoebox of an apartment, and not seeing ‘real’ people for a while. Although it comes naturally to be empathic, compassionate, and warm toward our friends and peers, I would never judge anyone as fiercely as I judge myself. Through writing it's rather easy to tell myself that I should be self-compassionate and let go of grand illusions of being in control ALL THE TIME. In our group, we rarely discussed external criticisms, pressures, or mandates (e.g., the university): the ongoing sharing was about shame, the inner invalidation, and a lack of empathy for the self.

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This is what I hear: Since you are the problem, YOU are the answer! Have you talked to a student counsel or a psychologist about how to manage your time better? Have you signed up for the seminar on procrastination and efficient writing? Put back the MANager in Management school! I mean, at least you should be able to manage yourself, and if not, what are you even claiming to be doing here? If you are failing, maybe you should DISCIPLINE yourself harder?

better
faster
stronger
"work is never over"

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Do we lack emotional knowledge about how to process insecurities and shame regarding productivity? How could we gain knowledge about that? Is this something we can unlearn? How to develop “better” practices with the organization, the community, and myself? How to distribute the responsibility? Would receiving messages of empathy, understanding, and support balance my insecurities about being (productive) enough?

I’ve seen the forwarded “go easy on your mental health” emails.

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Even if it sounds dramatic and whiny at times... it’s not the full representation of who we are... just expressions that needed to come out... may they be

as Ulmer says, “not unproductive” rather “differently productive” (2017, p. 201)

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As a way to disrupt the felt experience of shame we explore and reach for self-compassion:

3 | SELF-COMpassion

At the end of our group’s meetings, the participants often expressed a consoling “it’s nice to know I’m not alone.” This is what Neff refers to as recognition of one’s experience not as separated in isolation, rather as a part of common humanity (2003). The shared space became an entry point where mutual recognition of our vulnerable selves (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020) enabled self-compassion. It also disrupted self-judgment and over-identification with painful feelings.

The concept of self-compassion stems from Buddhist philosophy (Neff, 2003), and has been defined in western academia as an ability or a positive self-attitude that can be developed to be merciful and loving toward oneself when suffering (Reyes, 2012). It was introduced as an alternative concept to “the problematic construct of self-esteem,” where the emphasis was placed on “elevations of self-worth” by comparisons of “personal performance” (2003, p. 85). Much like Neff, here we agree that self-compassion is not about positive or negative evaluation, but rather about being kind toward yourself and recognizing that you are not alone in the human experience of suffering. Self-compassion allows us to recognize vulnerability both in our own selves, and in the other.
“Suffering manifests as a pattern of decreased self-care, decreased ability to relate to others, and diminished autonomy.” (Reyes, 2012)

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I wonder if, after we someday have returned to relatively ordinary life, we will also go back to our old habits, and our previous ways of thinking and working. Regarding how we see other people, our need for empathy? How will we relate to uncertainty? How to hold the inner saboteur with self-compassion? Will we steer back to the same productivity games? Because this professional context we operate in often feels very cold to me.

***

The group enabled me to relate to my (self) shaming and guilt differently, with curiosity and compassion. There was a moment that particularly stayed with me. We were in pairs, sharing how we ended up enrolling for the PhD, and my partner’s task was be to recount a tale, based on what I had said. When it was my turn to “receive” my partner’s attention, I felt vulnerable. I started talking about how I felt lost in the past, and how I had made my way through the Nordic university system. Then, my partner improvised a tale for me, building on the story I had told:

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a girl trapped by ivy plants. These plants were magical, as the stems kept the girl in her place and did not allow her to wander too far. She could barely move. The main branch was the father, a second the boss, and a third one the boyfriend. Eventually, she was so convinced that she must not move that she grew her stem to go deep into the ground. But one day someone, perhaps accidentally, left a machete close by. The girl grabbed it and cut herself loose from all the stems. The hardest one to cut was the one she herself had buried deep into the ground. Finally, as the last branch was cut, she was free. So away she ran!

She arrived to a seafront and jumped into a boat. Although she didn’t know how to swim, she crossed the ocean and never looked back. In the new land, she found fascinating new plants that she had never seen before. She explored the forest, but the branches were scratching her. The forest was not to her liking, so she traveled even further, until she reached a meadow. But this time, she was not alone, since she traveled with a faithful rock. They stopped at a pond: no poisonous ivy here, nor scratchy branches. She danced and jumped around her faithful rock – until she saw tiny weeds at her feet.

OH NO! They are going to get me again! How can I fight back? Should I run? After a while, she calmed down and noticed the weeds were just minding their own business, not threatening her. A calming intuition came over the girl: Maybe the grass has medicinal powers? She decided to stay in that meadow and trust the ground she was standing on, together with the little weeds and her faithful rock.

I was in awe when she finished the story. It was so touching to hear her mirroring my ongoing struggle of “I need to protect myself! I’m scared!” and transforming it into “maybe you can trust the little weeds at your feet.” A twist in the throat, followed by heavy breaths, don’t cry now. I felt a shift around my chest and back: of energy, of posture, of approach. Some weight was off. Such a simple activity and she saw so much. She gave me precious metaphors for and of myself that resonated profoundly. I was so humbled by how she engaged with my memories, my fears, struggles, and successes. My peer created new, alternative paths with them.

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As I was listening to others’ stories on how they managed themselves, how they dealt with their problems, and on how they took distance from work and its demands, I finally realized that being uncertain and struggling during one’s PhD journey is a common experience. I have the choice and the privilege of being able to NOT stress about my work too much, right now. I can learn to be self-compassionate.

*How is this new practice going to materialize?*

*Is it an individual decision or a relational becoming?*

***

The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves matter and are affective. How to make space to “carry our past with us” not as “something we already understand” and points toward a “correct path,” instead as counter-narratives that help orientate us by suggesting “possible futures” (Ahmed, 2006; O’Shea, 2019, p. 42).

*how can we*

*hold such stories in their messiness*

*with self-compassion*

*how to embrace the shame*

*sticky shame*

*not a straightforward journey*

*neither looking for an “epiphany”*

*stories that I have been telling (and believing)*

*If I craft alternative stories*

*Where would that lead me?*

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*On how writing together became an empathic practice for stories to emerge:*

### 4 | DIALOGIC WRITING AS AN EMPATHIC PRACTICE

Let’s tell vulnerable stories.

At least for ourselves, it’s all that matters for now.

The dialogic writing has allowed us to explore our memories that are entangled, embodied, affective.

And together we become aware of other possible paths, potential futures and viable roads to take.

*There is no correct answer,*

*rather a multiplicity of possibilities.*

The freedom of choice lies on my shoulders

When I know there's something else underneath
a soft call for peace, for compassion, for a truce
Am I going to keep on?

***

During our practice of collaborative collage, the process of dialogical writing in itself went through changes: first, it was very mechanical, as we were scribbling texts on a few topics. We were shedding light on our experiences, commenting on each other’s, and collectively going through events of the past year. Emergently, the process became much more affective, and now, toward the end of our account, we notice that the writing, the collaborative, dialogical, and reflexive process in itself, became an empathic practice (Campelia, 2017). Writing with and to each other enabled us to be creative in our research, through poems and personal accounts, and boosted us to express vulnerabilities in a poetic way to our collaborative companions without getting lost in them. Furthermore, the writing allowed us to articulate experiences that were difficult to raise through speech.

The reflection below depicts just one facet among multiple vulnerabilities, reflexive dialogs, and opportunities for relationality in our collaboration. It doesn't imply any major drama, but a recognition of something fragile that feels important:

_In this group of three_
_two of us are bound together by strings of enthusiasm and a belief in sharing_
_the third one floats around at a distance_
_I take steps toward you, offering whatever offerings I think might be of use to you_
_I ask how I can be of help_
_I wait for your responses to my calls_

What is empathic practice in collaboration

_I can give myself the gift of self-compassion_
_but what is self-compassion_
_if we don’t cross the boundaries between us, if we don’t live out our compassion for one another_
_In all my vulnerability_
_I want to be recognized, acknowledged in the role that I have in this_
_tell me what you want from me, and I will serve you, play with you_
_but don’t talk to me about empathic practice_
_if the goal is to accumulate the capital of self-compassion_

Is self-compassion capital you can accumulate?
Or a practice you learn and do?

We realized that we are no longer only writing about how past empathic encounters have affected us, but also engaging in an empathic practice in the very moment as a way of knowing with and through others (Campelia, 2017). Our aim here is to trigger and launch something, to carve out new paths for discussion in our personal thinking, others’ perceptions, collective sensemaking, organizational policies, and in how we work.
Allowing these reflexive practices to emerge
Soothes me, shows me the underwater shadows
whispers of possible paths, past mistakes, future triumphs
and although I know I can be good to others
I’m still learning to be good to myself

5 | AFTER-THOUGHTS

Our embodied existence is organized by “social and cultural norms and institutions in which the individual is conceived, matures and learns to labor” (Dale & Burrell, 2014, p. 165). Perhaps these norms are so internalized and invisible, that it truly is easier to self-blame for not being good enough, than to question the molds we are expected to fit. However, vulnerable empathic connections with another human feel so... soothing. It allows me to recognize whether I’m performing from a belief of not being good enough, instead of aiming to relate with others and myself from openness.

If we aim to create sustainable wellbeing, especially within the frames of a neoliberal business school, it’s necessary to take into account the embodied and relational aspect of organizing as a community (Fotaki & Harding, 2017). This entails acknowledging our vulnerabilities (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015) and interdependencies (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020) and resist normative expectations in academia (Lupu, 2021; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2021). For example, in our situated case as PhD students we are learning to embrace the academic norms, which Ashcraft (2017) calls “submission to the rule of excellence.” On the other hand, there is the opportunity to do it “differently” by engaging with “sociomaterial inhabitation of power and resistance... from within... by writing-enacting” (2017, p. 51). So, we collage:

Where to start? PhD as the site of academic activism,
with/through the other. imperfect. vulnerable
building community

The contributions of this paper are twofold: First, we show how vulnerable relationality allowed for early career scholars to engage with their affective experiences in the context of a neoliberal university. Meeting others in a vulnerable way (Helin, 2019, 2020; Meriläinen et al., 2022) enabled explicitly engaging with both individually and collectively difficult experiences around unproductivity, shame, and self-compassion, through relational, empathic and reflexive ways of sensing and knowing. Furthermore, this paper is not only a description of our experience per se, but actually “does” something (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012) by allowing us to touch and to be touched (Ahonen et al., 2020; Fotaki et al., 2014; Helin, 2019; Mandalaki, 2021; Meriläinen et al., 2022; Pullen, 2018) by unfolding our ordinary affects of shame (Beavan, 2019) and self-compassion. Second, we conceptualize the method of collaborative collage, as a way of engaging in reflexivity and identity work among the authors (Sobande & Wells, 2021), and as an accomplishment in itself. Such way of writing differently (Gilmore et al., 2019; Mandalaki & Daou, 2020; Meldgaard-Kjær & van Amsterdam, 2020) served as a way of engaging in methodological self-awareness and improvisation, and further through collaboration (Long et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2009) allowed for radical reflexivity and a dialogical space for exploration. Moreover, collaborative collage emerged as an empathic practice, which in itself may foster self-compassion among early career academics, by allowing engagement around creative and co-reflexive becoming.

We have explored, in a poetic way, our experiences as PhD students and our relationship to a neoliberal business school, with the added tensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. We contribute to existing literature around neoliberal
universities and collaboration by showing how relational vulnerability may foster new possibilities for understanding. Specifically, by discussing how empathic practices, both as the exercises of the “Becoming in Academia” group and as the dialogical collage writing of this paper, enabled us to open and make sense of our vulnerabilities. Moreover, the process of writing differently touched us and facilitated engaging to an empathic practice with our inner saboteurs. We show how writing collectively can disrupt self-judgment and activate dialogs on shame, unproductivity, and eventually enable self-compassion.

Finally, the paper demonstrates and suggests finding different paths to building an academic community that nurtures and cares. We believe that creative research cannot be done without engaging with one’s self and one’s vulnerabilities. Although the discoveries of our dialogical account are in many cases rooted in the social isolation caused by the pandemic, we believe that they are relevant for future explorations also in other times and contexts, and such academic activism nurtures our community in the future, respectively.

And I write, we discuss, they retell, you collage, they listen
Yet still, I’m not the captain of the ship
Nor the master of the sky
But I see things in a slightly different light
A purple shade that quivers when I narrate them

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
I confirm that the work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is in consideration for any other publication elsewhere. Additionally, there are no conflicts of interests to disclose.

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ENDNOTES
1 Our gratitude goes to the reviewer for this insight.
2 February 2020, before pandemic: during a panel discussion on "Coping with stress and harsh criticism in academia", a Faculty Member in High Administrative Position asks/suggests if testing for resilience should be part of the application process to the PhD program, or even a requisite. The Study Psychologist replied that resilience can’t be measured but can be developed.

February 2021, ongoing pandemic: I’m attending a webinar offered by the university on “Resilience in everyday work life—how to reinforce it?” The speaker keeps referring to resilience as the “ability to bounce back” and to achieve it the employee should be “able to negotiate resources, capabilities and skills in their network.”

3 This is a reference to the song "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger," released in 2001 by French duo Daft Punk.

REFERENCES


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