



# Governing through accountability: Gendered moral selves and the (im)possibilities of resistance in the neoliberal university

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Drawing on Judith Butler's early work on gender as performance and her later work on the ethically accountable subject, this study examines the production of gendered moral subjects under neoliberal governance in contemporary academia. The analysis of 40 semi-structured in-depth interviews with postdoc researchers and assistant, associate and full professors in a Belgian university reveals how in academics' narratives of their ethical relations of (non-)accountability towards multiple stakeholders, gendered subjects are performed along the heterosexual matrix reproducing the gender binary. The conjunction of gendered and ethical demands imposed through relations of accountability further opens up distinctively gendered possibilities of consent and resistance under neoliberal governance. We advance the extant literature on gender in academia which largely focuses on women's symbolic struggle to (dis)identify with a masculine professional norm. By locating power in the gendered relations of accountability towards multiple others, it re-conceptualizes gender as an ontological struggle in the constitution of the self as moral along gendered norms. The study rejoins recent scholarship that calls for the recognition and elaboration of a relational ethics by showing how such ethics enables the emergence of open and responsive subjectivities in relations of accountability.

## KEYWORDS

accountability, Butler, ethics, gender, neoliberal academia, resistance

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century, gender inequality in academia has increasingly been reconnected to contemporary neoliberal regimes such as new public management (NPM) (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Barry, Berg, & Chandler, 2012; Devine, Grummell, & Lynch, 2011; Goode & Bagilhole, 1998; Hey & Bradford, 2004; Krefting, 2003; Mauthner & Edwards, 2010; Morley, 1994, 2001; Nikunen, 2012, 2014; Parsons & Priola, 2013; Prichard & Deem, 1999; Thomas & Davies, 2002). This scholarship has theorized and documented women's struggle to build identities aligned with hegemonic academic norms increasingly permeated by a market logic. Neoliberal practices foster male ascendancy by promoting a new ideal academic subject profoundly imbued with masculinity (Krefting, 2003), centred on individualism, entrepreneurship, competition and performance (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Clarke, Knights, & Jarvis, 2012; Deem, 1998; Devine et al., 2011; Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt, & Terra, 2000; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Nikunen, 2012; Thomas & Davies, 2002; Willmott, 1995). Doing so, they undermine the values of academic collegiality, collaboration and trust (Barry et al., 2012; Bryson, 2004; Mauthner & Edwards, 2010; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). At odds with women's understanding of themselves, this academic ideal requires them to develop highly 'elastic' selves to cope with multiple demands in and outside academia (Devine et al., 2011; see also Mauthner & Edwards, 2010; Parsons & Priola, 2013), and feeding into a fantasy of achievable work-life balance (see also Bloom, 2015; Thomas & Davies, 2002).

In this literature, women's subordination is conceptualized as resulting from the difficulty to attain valued forms of subjectivity in a university permeated by male discourses stemming from NPM. Although women are seldom presented as passive actors and the heterogeneity of their experiences, identities and strategies are often acknowledged (Parsons & Priola, 2013), the emphasis is on the difficulty of resistance against male professional norms. The neoliberal ideology of meritocracy and the rational, voluntary choosing subject results in the assumption that women simply make the 'wrong decisions', effectively obscuring the structural reproduction of gender inequality (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Krefting, 2003; Nikunen, 2014). As resistance requires disengagement from a successful academic identity (Nikunen, 2012, 2014), while change on the contrary precisely requires engagement with and co-optation into the dominant discourses and practices, women are led to engage in highly conflicting identity work (Krefting, 2003; Parsons & Priola, 2013).

Although a focus on women's engagement with hegemonic discourses and managerial practices has generated a rich understanding of their identity struggles, it has also diverted attention away from the role of relations in the emergence of gendered subjectivities under neoliberal governance. Yet subjects do not emerge through solipsistic reflection, but through the self-reflective enactment of norms in social relations. As theorized by Judith Butler (1990, 2004), the gendered subject is not only performed within an abstract, 'cultural' framework of intelligibility, but always with and for a social audience, an Other who confers or denies recognition to it, a recognition which is structured along the heterosexual matrix, or the regulatory framework maintaining and reproducing the binary categorization of sex (Butler, 1988). It is our desire for recognition by the Other that makes us vulnerable to processes of subjection (Roberts, 2005). Speaking is thus always a *speaking-to* involving a reciprocal moral act in which the subject recognizes the Other based on the same normative frame as the Other will potentially recognize him or herself (see also Simmons, 2006; Thiem, 2008).

This is particularly the case in the neoliberal university, where academics' governance increasingly occurs through relations of accountability towards multiple 'fora', including public bodies, companies, students, project commissioners and civil society (Alexander, 2000; Baert & Shipman, 2005; Demeritt, 2000; Frølich, 2011; Peters, 1992; Willmott, 1995). Embedded in knowledge societies driven by a market logic, individualism and competition, universities expect academics to cater, with their work, to the heterogeneous needs of these multiple audiences, serving the public good (Hellström, 2004), be it through increasing students' human capital, the valorization of research through patents or formulating policy recommendations (Alexander, 2000). Accordingly, we argue, the gendered academic subject should today be understood as a *moral* subject emerging *through the relations* to these audiences constituting the neoliberal academic social space (Dubnick, 2011; Foucault, 1977).

This article draws from Butler's conceptualization of the subject as morally accountable (Butler, 2005) and gendered (Butler, 1990) to theorize and empirically investigate gendered subjection through the relations of accountability constitutive of contemporary neoliberal academic governance. Based on empirical data from a case study of a Belgian university including semi-structured in-depth interviews with 40 male and female postdoc researchers, tenure track researchers and professors in various ranks, and internal documents, we address three research questions: (i) Which fora constitute the social space of accountabilities in neoliberal academia? (ii) How is the academic subject performed along the heterosexual matrix within this space of accountabilities? (iii) Which gendered forms do consent and resistance take under neoliberal academic governance?

The article advances current understanding of power dynamics of gender in contemporary academia by unveiling the key role of relations of accountability towards others in the emergence of moral academic subjectivities patterned along the heterosexual matrix. Neoliberal governance functions as a double-edged sword that on the one hand constitutes an increasingly accountable academic subjectivity (Bansel, Davies, Gannon, & Linnell, 2008; Clarke et al., 2012), while on the other constrains the possibility to constitute a female subjectivity that is open and responsive through the relations of accountability, fulfilling the gendered norms. The neoliberal university governs the subject by prioritizing institutional accountability, and thus requiring subjects to give a non-account to the other (Butler, 2005) in certain relations, and hence suppressing the possibility of being responsive, which is central in the constitution of a female subjectivity. This approach unveils how the power inherent to processes of subjection is deeply connected to one's sense of morality and humanity, which goes deeper than symbolic processes of discursive construction of valued selves along offered professional identities (Hey & Bradford, 2004; Krefting, 2003; Nikunen, 2012). Altogether, our study rejoins recent scholarship (e.g., Fotaki & Harding, 2018; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015) that pleads for a relational ethics in organizations that are now often dominated by a masculine ethics of contract exchange (Diprose, 2002). Taking a Butlrean approach, we show the key role of gendered accountability in the emergence of ethical subjectivities that are more or less open and responsive to the other.

## 2 | UNDERSTANDING SUBJECTS' GOVERNANCE THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Scholars of higher education have highlighted how the introduction and development of NPM as a mode of governance has strengthened academics' accountability towards a diverse set of fora, enforcing performance, efficiency and productivity in novel ways, and supplanting values such as collegiality, collaboration and trust (e.g., Mauthner & Edwards, 2010). The notion of accountability originates in political sciences where it refers to a mode of governance that relies on actors' account-giving and justification vis-à-vis a forum, or the

*relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences. (Bovens, 2007, p. 450)*

In this sense, accountability thus specifically refers to practices of account-giving that occur in a principal-agent relationship wherein the principal, the forum, is positioned to delegate authority to the agent, the actor, who is held to account for his or her performance regularly (Pollit, 2003). The principal has, moreover, the possibility to interrogate the agent about his or her conduct, to pass judgement and to approve or condemn, and impose sanctions on the agent (Bovens, 2007).

On the agent's side, account-giving implies the awareness of his or her obligation to inform the forum about one's performance (i.e., in terms of data, outcomes, explanations and justifications) and about the possibility of consequences he or she may face in case of going against formal or informal obligations (Bovens, 2007). Public accountability, however, often involves the management of multiple, diverse and often conflicting expectations (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). Kearns (1996) uses the term 'accountability environment' to refer to the multiple fora

to which an actor might be accountable as a 'constellation of forces – legal, political, sociocultural and economic – that places pressures on organizations and people that work in them to engage in certain activities and refrain from others' (p. 19 in Behn, 2001, p. 6).

The subject produced and regulated through neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008) is held individually accountable for every choice he or she makes (Sugarman, 2015). He or she is, nevertheless, no passive receiver of conflicting demands but has an active role in his or her reflection on appropriate behaviour. Bovens (2007) indeed stresses that accountability is 'not only ex post scrutiny, but it is also about prevention and anticipation' (p. 453). As an autonomous, self-directive and rational neoliberal subject (Foucault, 2008), the actor will consider the adverse effects of a negative evaluation and will decide upon and adjust his or her behaviour accordingly (Bovens, 2007). The assumption of strong individualism and freedom of choice, underlying neoliberal governance, therefore enforces social control (Foucault, 2008; see also McKinlay & Pezet, 2017; Türken, Nafstad, Blakar, & Roen, 2016), as 'individual responsibility represents the pinnacle for justice' (Wrenn, 2014, p. 506). The institutional understanding of accountability thus rests on a modern understanding of the neoliberal subject as a self-contained, rational agent bestowed with intentional action and deliberative choice independent of the conditions that engender it.

### 3 | THE CONSTITUTION OF A MORAL SELF THROUGH RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

More recent scholarship on accountability has questioned this understanding of a rationally accountable subject under neoliberal governance. In these studies, the act of giving an account through which a moral and relational subject emerges, is emphasized as crucial in the understanding of accountability (Dubnick, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Hoskin, 1996; Messner, 2009; Munro & Mouritsen, 1996; Roberts, 2005). Drawing on various disciplinary traditions and authors ranging from Judith Butler (2005) to Adam Smith (1759), Dubnick (2011, 2014b) re-conceptualizes this notion as a moral force that fosters compliance not only through external pressure but also through subjects' internalization of an ethical commitment (see also Messner, 2009). In this understanding, accountability represents a

*critical ingredient in the building and maintenance of the social order within which structures (i.e. institutions, mechanisms, and processes) operate [...] Conceptually, accountability constitutes here what sociologists and social geographers would call a 'social space' – a milieu of account-giving and account-demanding human relationships that constitute what, for our purpose, would be more appropriately 'accountability space'. (Dubnick, 2011, pp. 708–709)*

A conceptualization of accountability as an internalized ethical commitment in relations with others can be traced back to the work of Butler (2005), who theorizes accountability as a performance, something we do in human interaction to take up responsibility. Building on Levinas (1981), Butler argues that individuals do not become responsible by virtue of the action in itself, as generally assumed, but by virtue of a relation towards an Other, to whom they hold a radical and unchosen pre-ontological susceptibility from which persecution may follow (see also Rhodes, 2017). So, the Other can address the subject, impose an ethical demand upon him or her to which he or she is compelled to respond. In this response, one will draw upon an ethical framework of norms and rules, persuasively use the language that makes us readable, and by which he or she hopes to be recognized and conferred a worthy, viable identity (Butler, 1997; see also Roberts, 2005, 2009). It is only by this recognition of others that the subject can become human. In this perspective, the subject no longer precedes relations of accountability towards a forum, but rather emerges through them.

Butler (2005) further delineates the specific set of norms and rules needed for the subject to become intelligible and to be recognized: becoming human is no easy task. As the subject becomes intelligible to the Other only by its subjection to a shared 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1982), which is always beyond oneself in sociality, accountability is always limited:

*the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our 'singular' stories are told. (Butler, 2005, p. 21)*

The ethical burden the subject carries to perform a viable self further becomes heavier when different relations hold him or her accountable along distinct and possibly conflicting norms (Messner, 2009 referring to Butler, 2005). The 'I' one wants to constitute can therefore never be complete, nor can the account that one gives of oneself be fully expressed in language, due to the 'opaqueness' at the heart of all individuals (Levinas, 1981). There is thus an inevitable ethical violence to the relational ethical self, as the subject can never be fully responsible (see also Cupples & Pawson, 2012; Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Messner, 2009), yet will be compelled to respond to the ethical demand, invoked by the embodied effect of the interaction with the Other (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015), even in the absence of rational argumentation (see also Messner, 2009). Butler (2005) argues for an ethics that acknowledges the limits of our self-knowledge as the limits of our responsibility: we have to assert the moral norms at the same time as we are questioning the authority that makes us assert these norms. If this is the case, she holds, we will not be considered irresponsible or, if we are, we will be forgiven (Loacker & Muhr, 2009).

#### 4 | THE HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX AS A FRAME OF INTELLIGIBILITY FOR RELATIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Butler's (1988) earlier work suggests that such account-giving likely needs to be intelligible at once along the heterosexual matrix, due to its pervasive normative nature. She offers a conceptualization of gender as a social norm constituted and normalized through its performative repetition in interaction, in *doing*, contra prior understandings of gender as a stable identity which individuals author. As a performance, gender is always beyond oneself as it needs an audience, an Other, to emerge (see also Diprose, 2002). Central to Butler's understanding of gender is the heterosexual matrix, the 'regime of truth' or regulatory framework, along which behaviour is rendered intelligible and by which the binary categorization of sex is maintained and reproduced. The subject is thus accountable along the heterosexual matrix and, driven by the desire for recognition, to become an intelligible subject, it will give an account of itself in accordance with this normative framework. The performance of gender along the heterosexual matrix will in turn reproduce the script and maintain the binary (Butler, 1988).

As any behaviour is susceptible to be assessed along the regulatory heterosexual framework, individuals give an account of their gender – 'do gender' – in virtually all they do. These enactments, on which the social norms scripting the performance of gender depend for their persistence, at once offer possibilities to 'undo gender' through the deconstruction and denaturalization of masculinity and femininity. Taking a transformative position on the binary male/female, one can perform gender differently and thereby reveal its constructed nature. By questioning the taken-for-grantedness of behaviour, new meanings of gender and more legible subject positions can emerge, allowing for a broadening of conditions of existence (Butler, 2004). However, according to Butler, such transformative performance is not located beyond the gender binary, but rather reads it differently. Importantly, the deviation of a performance likely entails social punishment and even violence, including the very denial of one's existence as a human being. In this sense, the possibilities of performing a subject crucially lie in one's relation with others and, more specifically, one's desire for recognition (Butler, 1993).

The conceptualization of accountability as occurring in an accountability space or 'environment' (Kearns, 1996) in which specific forms of subjectivity can legitimately emerge, allows for a productive approach to theoretically articulate the performance of gendered subjects within neoliberal governance in academia. It is in this space of accountability, constituted by specific relations of accountability towards multiple stakeholders (Dubnick, 2011), that specific gendered moral subjects (can) emerge through acts of account-giving eliciting recognition as human beings.

## 5 | THE CASE

The case study is a regionally anchored, public university located in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. The university was in origin a technical university, yet includes today six faculties (Architecture & Arts, Business Economics, Medicine & Life Sciences, Engineering Technology, Law, and Sciences) and two schools (Educational Studies and Transportation Sciences), and is home to 5500 students, about 500 PhD students and 1200 academics, administrative and technical personnel. The university personnel are balanced in terms of gender (University Year Report, 2014), yet, as it is often the case in academia, women are overrepresented in administrative positions (70 per cent) and underrepresented in academic ones (42 per cent). Similar to most universities, including all the Flemish ones, the share of women also negatively correlates with rank: 49 per cent of postdoctoral researchers, 33 per cent of tenure track professors, 29 per cent of assistant professors, 36 per cent of associate professors, 23 per cent of professors and only 10 per cent of full professors are women (VLIR, 2014). For top administrative positions, the university scores better than other ones, as 11 of the 16 directors of staff departments are women.

The main sources of funding of the university are the Flemish government (59 per cent of all available budget, based on student numbers and research output), project grants gained through market competition (26 per cent) and own profits (12 per cent) (University Year Report, 2014). This financial structure reflects the contemporary governance of Flemish higher education, which is based on principles of deregulation, autonomy and accountability (De Wit & Verhoeven, 2004). In this system, both state and non-state universities retain a large degree of autonomy to adapt to demands of the (international) market (De Wit, 2006), yet remain accountable for the use of public funding (Verhoeven, 2008). Flemish higher education is characterized by relatively contained enrolment fees in bachelor and master's programmes for Belgian and European Union students, ranging between 700 and 1000 euros a year (Education Flanders, 2015). Next to the structural public funding based on the number of credits earned by students and research output, a larger share of funding is competitively acquired on the market (Verhoeven, 2010).

Academics have a civil servant statute, yet are collegially organized as a professional body. For instance, deans and the chancellor are elected by (academic) personnel. Academic bodies are supported by administrative personnel led by administrative directors and the university 'general administrator'. Academics' performance is continuously measured through multiple surveillance and accounting devices (e.g., student evaluations, monitoring by the state, personnel record for promotion, contracts with external project commissioners, etc.). Yet this information does not have effects in itself but is rather provided to commissions composed by academics who evaluate individuals' performance. For instance, while the university utilizes administrative 'norms' to allocate personnel to units, different from other academic contexts, no comprehensive time tracking system is in place (cf. Bansel et al., 2008). Departments retain some degree of autonomy in allocating teaching, research and community service tasks among their members. The grounds for promotion are first evaluated by committees composed by peers within each faculty, who formulate advice, and only in a second stage benchmarked along 'objective' criteria and (externally) validated. In the Flemish system, academics remain thus highly dependent on their peers both for the content of their job and their career advancement.

## 6 | METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted as part of a larger research project commissioned by the university in a joint initiative of the research coordination office, the human resource management (HRM) unit and the rectorate as a response to the gender action plan called forth by the Flemish minister of innovation and public investment in 2011. The action plan set goals to enhance the presence of female professors in Flemish universities' executive boards and to decrease the gender imbalance in male-dominated science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Internally, the research project was however purposely presented in gender-neutral terms as a study on careers, personnel's wellbeing, and work-life balance of both the faculty and staff.

## 6.1 | Data collection

The main data source are 40 interviews with postdoctoral researchers (13), assistant professors and associate professors (12), and (full) professors (15). Respondents held academic positions in the faculties of sciences (19), business economics (11), transportation sciences (4), law (3), and medicine and life sciences (3). Sixteen respondents were men and 24 women. Based on a comprehensive list provided by the HRM department, academic staff were initially randomly contacted yet attempting to achieve a balanced sample in terms of respondents' academic rank, gender and faculty of affiliation. In line with common ethical guidelines, respondents were informed that anonymity would be respected in all phases of the research (Flick, 2009). Whenever a person did not respond or declined, another potential respondent with a matching profile was contacted. Internal documents (e.g., academic organs, personnel statistics, internal by-laws, yearly reports, etc.) and the university website were used as complementary sources to gather descriptive information and gain insight into the formal governance of the university.

The interviews were conducted by a female pre-doctoral researcher familiar with the topic and guided by a questionnaire drafted by the second author based on existing literature. Questions were clustered into five major themes: (i) career background; (ii) work and relations; (iii) experience with career steps (e.g., recruitment procedures, promotion, contracts, etc.); (iv) work–life balance; and (v) future ambitions. Three slightly different versions of the questionnaire were drafted to align with the rank of the interviewees. Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and were all recorded. To guarantee anonymity to respondents, interviews were transcribed by an external company and fully anonymized before analysis.

Interviews were chosen as the main data collection method as they offer the opportunity to perform subjects. Since 'speaking is already a kind of doing, a form of action, one that is already a moral practice and a way of life' (Butler, 2005, p. 126), every narration is an act of giving an account, a way of constructing and performing an intelligible self (Butler, 2005; Messner, 2009) in relation to the listener. Even when there is no clear accountability in one's story, the absence suggests that the respondent does not feel responsible, and he or she will be judged upon this (non)-account (Messner, 2009). At the same time, we are aware that the interview itself represents a site of accountability between a pre-doctoral female researcher and more senior male or female academics, subjected to imposed frameworks of intelligibility along gender and seniority norms, which make particular kinds of academic subjectivity unlikely to be performed by the interviewee (Zanoni & Van Laer, 2016). Moreover, if we admit that interviewees expose their selves in performing an 'I' in the interviews with us, then we must also admit that neither their own accounts nor our reading thereof can fully capture the truth about the subject: the subject remains opaque to itself and to us (Butler, 2005).

## 6.2 | Data analysis

The data analysis occurred in three phases. To address the first research question (Which fora constitute the social space of accountabilities in the neoliberal academic regime?), we initially identified the fora featuring in the interview transcripts. Fragments were marked when the interviewee mentioned a relation with a significant other or with oneself to whom he or she justified his or her conduct. When one forum was mentioned multiple times in response to one question, it was only counted once. When the interviewee mentioned this forum again later in the interview, this was counted as a new fragment. Through this procedure we could identify seven different fora, more or less frequently featuring in the accounts, towards which speakers constructed themselves: family members (73 fragments), an idealized academic self (54 fragments), colleagues junior to them (43 fragments), students (29 fragments), peers (27 fragments), society (14 fragments) and external project funders (6 fragments).

In a second step, to address the second research question (How is the accountable subject performed along the heterosexual matrix?), we analysed all identified excerpts in depth. To avoid the methodological trap of fixing gender identities beforehand (cf. de Souza, Brewis, & Rumens, 2016), we started from the narratives constituting the self, irrespectively of speakers' gender. First, drawing on theories of accountability, we could identify two main modalities of performing an ethical self: through institutional accounts and relational accounts. In the first type, in line with an

institutional understanding of accountability (Bovens, 2007), speakers constructed themselves as accountable, 'doing the right thing in the relation', by virtue of the more or less explicit punishment that may follow from their misaligned behaviour, revealed through a control mechanism as infringing contracts or social norms. In the second type of accounts, following Butler's (2005) understanding of accountability, speakers rather gave an open and responsive account of themselves. Here, the right behaviour was understood as being morally obliged to respond with openness to the demand and to take up responsibility invoked in the relation to the other itself.

Then, we examined the relevance of heterosexual norms in the performance of the self through the institutional and relational accountability. A focus on the narratives and the intelligibility norms to which they refer to construct the subject allowed us to show how gendered subjectivities emerge instead of taking them for granted. In the act of giving an account, a male and female subject emerged from institutional and the relational accountabilities, respectively, firmly inscribing morally accountable subjects in the heterosexual matrix.

In a last phase, addressing the third research question (Which gendered forms do consent and resistance take under neoliberal governance?), we interpreted the fragments in terms of the implications of a performance of accountability along the heterosexual matrix for the ability of gendered academic selves to resist the neoliberal academic governance. Here, we thus examined how the conjunction of a neoliberal discourse of accountabilities and expectations scripted by the heterosexual matrix distinctively constrained the performance of accountable subjects.

## 7 | GIVING A GENDERED ACCOUNT OF ONESELF UNDER NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE

In their interviews with us, academics reflected extensively on the neoliberal ideal academic subject who is able to compete and perform as well as the multiple relations of accountability which foster such subject in the neoliberal university. Respondents performed selves accountable to their families, an idealized academic self, junior colleagues, students, peers, society and external commissioners. So, despite NPM's suppression of collegiality, collaboration and trust, the relations of accountability towards a diverse set of fora remain important in the constitution of academic subjectivity, yet do so in distinctive ways. While fora were common to all respondents, the notion of the 'right conduct' in the performance of an accountable self occurred through distinct understandings of relations of accountability, largely structured along the heterosexual matrix, giving rise to different forms of ethicality and opening up distinct possibilities to resist neoliberal governance.

### 7.1 | Performing ethical academic selves as institutionally accountable

For all interviewees, the configuration of multiple fora constituted a social space of institutionalized accountabilities, entailing a wide range of formal control mechanisms enacted by the different fora and by which their performance was judged based on whether clearly defined targets were met or not. When narrating such institutional accountabilities towards others, academics' performed 'controlled' and potentially 'punished' selves who justified their behaviour in terms of avoiding the negative consequences of misbehaviour:

*Education is not so important [for career progression] nowadays. It is only important if students say: 'It was sufficient or it was bad.' But of course, that is only the opinion of the students and our student group is rather small. So, it happens that only five students evaluate a course and you will face consequences because these five students indicate that you are a bad teacher. (assistant professor)*

*What we have to do just to be able to 'do science', that is beyond imagination. The state has a big responsibility. All these quality systems, that's under pressure of the state. They think that we are criminals, gangsters, swindlers, etc., who have to be controlled. If you don't control, who knows what we will do. (full professor)*



Accountability is here constructed as meeting the specific performance criteria measured through the forum's monitoring. Although in general speakers contested the evaluation criteria and the control, these accounts produce an ethical subject that adjusts behaviour based on the evaluation of the costs of misbehaviour against the benefits of right conduct. Through the accountability relation, speakers performed an academic subject subjected to excessive demands restricting their freedom, obliging them to respond through action. They gave accounts of themselves as 'controlled selves' by the governance system, and as meeting the demands put on them by fora to avoid punishment, in line with the institutional understanding of accountability (Bovens, 2007, 2010; Pollit, 2003; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). Ethicality in these excerpts thus stems from the potential consequences one's misconduct in relation to the other might entail for the actors' selves.

Performing such subject did not always require the formal obligation to meet quantitatively specified targets — as, for instance, in the case of tenure track agreements —, but could also be grounded in more generally formulated institutional expectations tied to specific academic roles:

*Also if you look at the funding for research. We write project proposals to death to get peanuts. I'm talking about FWO. In the end, to get 90,000 euro a year. But 90,000 for all that work. What can you do with 90,000 euro? It's not much. In experimental groups highly dependent on machines, you need quickly 10,000 euros a person a year. You only get 4000. The rest you need to find elsewhere [...] the structural funding of research, of the lab, is very minimal. The research team is primarily funded through projects. So it's important that a new principal research is able to get grants. (full professor)*

*I am a supervisor of seven master theses and at one point all these students need to get your approval and so they deposit at once seven theses on your desk and then ... Before that day, they will need your signature, so yes, then you are obliged to do this during the evening or weekends. (assistant professor)*

In these fragments, respondents explain their behaviour as stemming from the institutional expectancies related to their roles: as principal investigator, the first speaker writes projects to bring in the money to continue research activities, and as supervisor, the second reads master theses outside office hours so that they can be submitted on time. Their narratives perform an ethical self who does the 'right' thing not because of the threat of the social judgement of and confrontation with the junior scholars depending on funding or the students depending on the signature, but to respond to a more abstract accountability towards the university in terms of more general institutional expectations that will eventually lead to consequences for the subject if not met (i.e., reduction of one's research capacity and output, negative evaluation for teaching due to students' complaints).

Likewise, narratives drew on partially informal yet collectively shared norms on 'the right conduct to further one's career'. We refer to this forum as the ideal academic, which we understand as an internalized neoliberal, institutionally accountable ethical self. In giving such account, respondents assessed their own behaviour and conduct against the criteria used for extending their contract or for promotion. They narrated a contemporary or future self that might be punished for 'misbehaviour', such as the failure to set the 'right' priorities, by missing out on career opportunities:

*I had so many tasks ... A lot of education and policy tasks. So my research activities drastically diminished and consequently the amount of publications is ... below what I want it to be. So yes, that is something that may turn out to be a disadvantage [for my career]. (postdoctoral researcher)*

*I have more junior colleagues to supervise than some other departments of the university, where they have six or seven professors. I partly created this work pressure myself. [...] On the other hand, I'm still here because I hope to achieve something. (professor)*

Although the subject is formally accountable to the university's academic community, which will, through its organs, evaluate the performance in the future and deliberate about one's career, the emphasis is here on the speaker's accountability to the self. Subjects' attempts to attain an ideal academic reveal how they have internalized

institutional accountabilities, and how such internalization in turn shapes the contours of their ethical self as institutionally accountable. In these accounts, the problem of conflicting accountabilities arises, as one feels hampered to comply to the multiple demands one poses on oneself – as an internal forum, as it were – to meet the ideal academic norm and enhance one's chances of career progression. These fragments perform a subject that masters – or occasionally fails to master – conflicting accountabilities by ventilating consequences and calculatively setting priorities.

Taken together, these excerpts show how the social space of accountability of neoliberal academia exerts power by fostering the performance of institutionally accountable ethical selves. Subjects are constituted as ethical beings by emphasizing their awareness of and attempts to master the multiple demands imposed on them through measurable targets, institutional expectations related to their roles and internalized collective norms. As these demands are all tied to institutional success and individual advancement, these respondents perform an ethical self along institutional accountability even when they are aware that this 'right' conduct controls them by limiting their (academic) freedom.

## 7.2 | Performing ethical academic selves as relationally accountable

At the same time, many of our respondents performed an ethical subject through relational accountabilities invoking a moral commitment they conceded to in the relation with a forum. In these cases, the understanding of the right conduct was incited by the self's moral obligation and responsibility towards the other stemming in the relation itself. Respondents justified their behaviour towards the other not out of fear of the consequences, but by virtue of their moral relation towards the other. Some respondents, for instance, constructed themselves as relationally accountable towards students:

*I guess, what I like the most is to work with Master students, because many of them choose finance and then you can give more in-depth courses and they will give feedback, like 'that was an interesting course'. Or they discover interesting things in finance which they can use. The same for a master thesis, we have students writing a very good master thesis, really giving all of themselves while writing it ... So indeed, the contact with students is what I like the most. (associate professor)*

*I cannot go to sleep if the course of the next day is not perfectly prepared. I just can't. [...] The most tangible of our job is teaching, because it confronts you. You have to teach your courses, take exams, that is so much more pressing. [...] I invested a lot of time in education. I would not dare to give a class which isn't 100% perfect. I'd feel terrible. (professor)*

These fragments construct an academic subject in terms of one's moral responsibility towards students, who confront the self, imposing an ethical demand upon it. Both the demand and the speaker's action to address it are expressed through a language of embodied vulnerability: the self cannot be itself and be ethical without and outside this relation to the other.

This understanding of accountability as an open, porous relation between self and other was also often found in accounts on the demands put on the academic self by society:

*[Research] is just the best job. What do I find the best part? Science keeps me going, curiosity to discover new things and 'wow, look at what the colleagues in that university have done, look what they have made!' this is what keeps me going, the search for new knowledge ... Not just knowledge for itself, sometimes they think that we are in an ivory tower ... to improve the world. Like sun energy, new batteries for electric cars and that type of stuff, that is the best part. (assistant professor)*

*I also believe, even though you are paid by the university, it's still normal that you 'go for it' [...] and that's especially true for European money, that's citizens who pay. Everybody pays. So, you need to use [the money] well. Then you need to make sure that you reach results. (assistant professor)*

Despite the different tone, both fragments construct an academic self that does not act solely for the satisfaction of its own desire, but rather to meet an ethical commitment towards a collective forum – the world, the European tax payer, us all – to use public financial resources wisely and generate knowledge that improves society. Again, these narratives transcend the university's institutional mechanisms of accountability rather highlighting the openness of the act and the ethics inherent to the relation.

Relational accountability also commonly featured in constructions of the self vis-à-vis colleagues, as vividly illustrated by the following excerpts:

*I had interesting research going on and a good collaboration with colleagues, people were counting on me for samples and measurements. So there were certain circumstances surrounding the decision. So, was I forced or was it a free choice ... I think, at that point I had no other choice than to keep on working. (assistant professor)*

*Parental leave is absolutely not done, whatever the circumstances may be. Our group counts three women, my colleague once said: 'We do not do parental leave', I don't think it already existed when she became a mother. [...] One day I told her: 'I'm considering parental leave, working 4/5', she started crying and I've only seen her cry once before that moment, that was when she told me she had cancer, the second time was the day I told her I considered parental leave. Then I said to myself, I cannot do this, there's both of us, we're a tandem, I cannot do this to her, so I won't. (assistant professor).*

Both fragments highlight the other's dependence on the self as a moral ground for enacting a certain behaviour, while also alluding to the reverse dependence of the self on the other for its ethical existence: the self and the other are tied in a relation of inter-subjective vulnerability. This relational accountability is inscribed within a relation of solidarity between peers, sometimes made explicit through group norms guiding individuals' moral behaviour. While the first fragment stresses the impossibility of discerning the own choice from the self's social space of accountability towards others, the second fragment constructs a moral self by stressing the sacrifice one makes to avoid inflicting pain to the other, a pain that is literally compared to the pain of realizing one's life is threatened.

Taken together, the excerpts above surface how, in a neoliberal space of accountability, power operates on the subject by fostering the performance of the relationally accountable ethical self. Ethical selves emerged by virtue of the relation, as the right conduct in the accounts were stemming from the openness and responsiveness to the other. This is a distinct form of ethicality than the one emerging through an institutional understanding of the relation of accountability, in which the ethical academic was constituted through the conduct of avoiding (in)formal punishment by the other.

### **7.3 | The gendered nature of the ethic academic selves performed in the intensified space of accountability: Possibilities for consent and resistance**

In this social space of neoliberal governance, the academic subjects performed through these two distinct forms of accountability and ethicality were furthermore faithfully patterned along the heterosexual matrix, which imposed distinct gendered norms through which subjects could make themselves intelligible. Our respondents constructed themselves either as 'man' through narratives of institutional accountability or as 'woman' through narratives of relational accountability. These gendered norms constituting the self as readable in relations entailed that the performed gendered subject could deal with the conjunction of demands by different fora in distinct ways, shaping distinct possibilities for their consent and resistance to neoliberal governance, which largely reproduced the heterosexual matrix.

The ethical self performed through institutional accountability managed conflicting demands by setting priorities based on a calculative consideration of the positive outcomes or the punishment of consenting to certain demands versus other ones:

*Teaching is not important, it is only important when you are bad at it [because negative student evaluations can hamper career progression]. Only when you're doing a bad job, then you will be put aside. People doing a great job in education are not appreciated by the university. [...] So my teaching preparations are minimal, often limited to revising the slides a quarter hour before starting my lecture to enable me to explain the course material, but actually it is not how it should be. (male postdoctoral researcher)*

*[...] There are other elements which, I believe, should be equally crucial, but these are brushed aside in order to achieve your publications. Like education and social services. While actually I believe these elements should be the core of a university and they move to the background way too often. It's a pity, you always have to make this consideration ... 'I cannot react to demands for ...' for example for social service or to take part in debates or that kind of stuff. Because, you know, at the end of the ride, these things are hardly taken into account, there is hardly any recognition. (male associate professor)*

Here, the subject is performed along male norms of intelligibility, a subject who might condemn the conflict between accountabilities towards different fora, yet at once rationalizes 'good conduct' by setting priorities within this accountability space to meet those accountabilities most beneficial to his career and resisting those considered less so.

As the ethical subject emerges through the relation of accountability, imposing different gendered norms on the addressee, the speaker can construct itself as closed, by giving a non-account, in the relation, without running the risk of becoming or being considered 'immoral'. Consider the following fragments constituting the self through the explicit denial of the relation to the other:

*The relations with colleagues you mentioned. I consider them less important. Because basically you can always crawl back to your own hiding place. If you don't want a relation with your colleagues, you just don't. (male full professor)*

*I always worked very hard and my private life has always been like a stream of water, winding its way through the rocks of hard work. (male postdoctoral researcher)*

By consenting to the institutional accountabilities beneficial to their career and resisting institutional and relational accountabilities that are not, these speakers construct a subject who consents to the norms of the gendered matrix and in turn reproduces it. This was even the case for the only respondent in our sample who constructed a male subjectivity not centred on an academic career:

*Why would I need the title of full professor? Maybe I will work here for another 10 years and then afterwards, what will the title be worth? Nothing, you'll take it in your grave. Other things matter more to me, like my family, leisure activities, etc. (male assistant professor)*

Although different from the previous ones, this account resists academic accountabilities, it still performs an ethical subject by emphasizing the beneficial behaviour for the self rather than the subject's openness towards the other. In this sense, this account constructs a male subject along the heterosexual matrix, and by so doing reaffirms and reproduces it.

The ethical self performed through relational accountability was on the contrary centred on the demand of responsiveness invoked by multiple relations, and therefore faced an ethical burden to constitute itself as moral due to the difficulty of conforming to this commitment to be open and responsive in all relations:

*There is no structural funding, only the teaching assistant and I are paid by the university, external funds are needed for all others. And like I said, I still feel responsible. And OK, it's fine if you call me a mother hen. I just believe that young people, doing their best, should not be punished [lose their job] [...] The time and energy you need to invest in writing these projects is getting worse. It's becoming more difficult. This means*

*that the work pressure will increase and that I will have less time to publish, but I will try to publish one every two to three years. (female assistant professor)*

In line with heteronormative norms of intelligibility, a female subject is constructed as caring and responsible for others in a broader social space of relational accountability. An embodied ethical self is performed that feels responsible towards junior colleagues, sacrificing what could be important to the self — publications to advance one's career — to care for them. Subjected to multiple regimes of truth regulating these relations and the associated heteronormative demands, the female academic subject becomes 'elastic' (Devine et al., 2011) in its attempt to be open in all relations of accountability.

Yet, precisely because of the openness to others in the constitution of the ethical gendered self, and the impossibility to consent to all relational demands at once, such instances inevitably entail a (potential) ethical failure. This is particularly manifest when accountabilities towards academic fora are juxtaposed to accountabilities towards fora in the private sphere:

*You always have to take care of everything [at home] and of course, you have your conferences, you have your courses abroad, you have collaboration for which you have to go abroad ... So yes, it's a lot to take care of every time. I make sure everything is planned, that means very often I bring them [the children] to their grandparents or let a babysit come over. Because otherwise, it's just not feasible. (female assistant professor)*

*The idea of healthy meals [to be purchased by personnel at the university to be brought home], that's really something, extra value. Because otherwise, we always had to get French fries or a kebab, which is not really what I would call healthy food. (female assistant professor)*

*That's something I always tell young assistants, and more often to female assistants than male assistants, don't invest your time in domestic work, delegate it. [...] My daughter was four months old and my son three years old. My husband had a very demanding job. So we hired a maid so that the household would be done and we could invest our time in our job and the children. (female full professor)*

The female subjects performed in these accounts consent to the academic demands under neoliberal governance by emphasizing how domestic tasks are delegated. Yet at once they carefully reaffirm the own responsibility towards children and the family, to still meet the heterosexual norms of intelligibility defining them — socially but also ethically — as women. Tellingly, the few instances in which the relations of accountability under neoliberal academia were openly denied were imbued with feelings of guilt:

*They wanted to increase the amount of publications, we had a performance review by that time and I told them right away that I preferred not to take part in this, that I'd rather publish on my own pace. He [leader of the team] asked me explicitly: do you still want to publish articles? I told him yes, but at my own pace. He found this difficult [...] I told him the same moment that, of course since I would publish less, I did not aspire a career as Professor, because I know these publications.... So I told him, that is not my ambition. However, if the conditions changed, but it seems that won't be the case [...] I made those choices because I wanted to keep my private life in order and I felt out of balance, with three children at home. I made that choice because things at home need to be in order and then we shall see what the consequences are for my career. I do feel that I missed opportunities professionally, but that is that. It's probably a necessary consequence [of my own choices]. (female associate professor)*

Resistance against accountability towards academic others is achieved here by stressing its incompatibility with accountabilities towards non-academic others. Despite the speaker's emphasis on individual choice, this account constructs an intelligible moral female subject faithfully along the heterosexual matrix, reproducing this latter.

Clearly, the gendered norms along which accountability is patterned constrained the performance of resistant academic subjects in gender-specific ways, with quite distinct effects for male and female academic subjects. While

the former constructed an institutionally accountable ethical subject by setting priorities in their conflicting accountabilities in the function of their careers, the latter constructed a relationally accountable ethical subject by attempting to attend to all accountabilities and thus facing an enhanced potential of ethical failure. Neither modality of resistance seems to question the neoliberal governance through accountability, as both subjectivities rely on this latter for attaining their distinct ethicality.

## 8 | DISCUSSION

This article has combined Butler's work on the act of giving an account to the other (Butler, 2005) and her early work on gender (Butler, 1988, 1990) to investigate the constitution of ethical academic subjects along the heterosexual matrix under contemporary academia's neoliberal governance. We argued that this theoretical approach is suitable to understand the performance of distinct, gendered ethical selves in this space of intensified accountability towards multiple audiences (Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

The conceptualization of the subject as inherently relational (Butler, 2005) enables our analysis to go beyond extant understandings of neoliberal governmentality regimes in academia as producing autonomous subjects who are rational, calculative and self-directive in their behaviour and decisions (Foucault, 2008; see also Dean, 2010; McKinlay & Pezet, 2017; Rose, 1999) and individually responsible for their choices (Wrenn, 2014). On the contrary, we maintain that neoliberal governance operates through relations of accountability. The ethical academic subject is constituted through account-giving within account-demanding relationships (Dubnick, 2011), in response to the confrontation with the other in which one seeks recognition as viable human being (Butler, 2001, 2005; see also Loacker & Muhr, 2009). Moreover, building further on Butler's work, we unveil how these relations of accountability are structured along the heterosexual matrix, and thus perform *gendered* ethical academic subjects.

This insight advances current understandings of gender as occurring largely at the symbolic level, whereby the reproduction of academia's gendered social order occurs through a hegemonic discourse of the academic as a male subject position and the difficulty of women academics to construct themselves accordingly and to enact the associated professional practices (e.g., Hey & Bradford, 2004; Krefting, 2003; Nikunen, 2012). Conceptualizing power as entailing the ontological question of the constitution and recognition of a moral self in the relation with others (Butler, 1990, 2004, 2005), our study rather recasts women academics' struggle beyond their (dis)identification with a masculine professional norm (e.g., Devine et al., 2011; Morley, 1994; Thomas & Davies, 2002). Taking into account the social nature of our gendered coming-into-being reveals women's ontological struggle in the constitution of a morally accountable self that, as a human being, takes responsibility for the other (Levinas, 1981) under neoliberal governance in contemporary academia. Paradoxically, whereas the decrease of collegiality, the importance of relations with colleagues, in neoliberal academia is often considered as detrimental to women's careers (e.g., Mauthner & Edwards, 2010), our study surfaces how it is precisely by virtue of the enhanced relations with others that problems emerge in the ethical constitution of oneself as 'woman'.

Locating the dynamics of gender and power in the constitution of a moral self in the relations of accountability further enables an appreciation of the gendered nature of subjects' possibilities of resistance to neoliberal governance. Positing that we seek recognition of ourselves as human beings in relations of accountability (Butler, 2005) entails that 'we can assume our own agency not against but only *through* subjection' (Roberts, 2005, p. 638; emphasis added). Indeed, as our findings clearly show, the extent and modalities of academics' resistance is largely shaped by the conjunction of neoliberal and gendered demands imposed upon them to be intelligible in the accountability space.

Driven by the desire for recognition (Butler, 1990, 2004, 2005), academics faithfully complied with neoliberal demands institutionally or relationally along the gendered binary, reproducing themselves the heterosexual matrix. This reproduction was not monolithic, as the scripted norms of the matrix were deployed and bent to accommodate one's acts to retain gendered intelligibility in the eyes of the specific audience. Also, importantly, while the

accountability relations reaffirmed the heterosexual matrix, the narrated social practices did not always maintain the traditional gendered division of labour outside the professional sphere.

Nonetheless, our findings seem to temper Butler's (1990, 2004) promise of performativity as offering the possibility to deconstruct the normative binary by taking a transformative position. We could not observe instances of 'overt' queering in our narratives. Even when speakers talked about choices that contrasted gendered expectations, they did so through a modality of accountability appropriate to their gender, to retain intelligibility and worthiness as human beings. This might in part be due to the fact that the interview site represents itself a site of accountability of male or female academic respondents and a junior female researcher. This relation is likely to have constrained the possibilities of performing 'alternative' subjectivities at odds with the gender and seniority norms imposed in the interview setting (Zanoni & Van Laer, 2016). Also, our findings might reflect the origins of the university in the exact and biomedical sciences, and the fact that until a few years ago, the Faculty of Business Economics was the only faculty of social sciences. This history, which is reflected in our sample, might explain the virtual absence of narratives of transformation, constructing alternative individual or collective subjectivities.

Without a shared language of transformation, queering might remain concealed behind individual micro-instances of 'attuning' norms in the constitution of an intelligible self to others. Future research might want to examine queering in instances where meaning about the self is suspended and awareness is expressed about one's own contradictions and inconsistency, one's opaqueness and fundamental inadequacy to fully comprehend norms. Relatedly, queering might emerge in accounts of the self which de-emphasize feelings of guilt for one's ethical failure to be accountable towards oneself and others along norms of intelligibility (cf. Roberts, 2009) and naming the ethical violence deriving from norms that are always before and beyond oneself (Butler, 2005; see also Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Messner, 2009).

Overall, our findings show how neoliberal governance functions as a double-edged sword that on the one hand fosters an increasingly accountable subjectivity (Bansel et al., 2008; Clarke et al., 2012) yet, on the other hand, punishes ethical selves that are open and responsive in accountability relations for not making the right choices. This insight echoes the work of Rosalyn Diprose (2002), who argues that the ethics emerging from the generosity and openness towards the other has no place in a 'masculine economy of contract exchange' (p. 6; see also Pullen & Rhodes, 2015). Based on such premise, Fotaki and Harding (2018) recently suggested that social transformation in organizations can only stem from the recognition and elaboration of a relational ethics. Likewise, our article suggests that the ethical space of accountability needs to be opened up to enable an ethical embodied engagement (see also Knights, 2015) in which relational subjectivities and possibilities for generosity can emerge (Fotaki & Harding, 2018; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015). This requires calling into question the injustice that emerges from the normalization of the 'corporeal gift' (Diprose, 2002), or the taken-for-grantedness of the generosity and openness constitutive of the female ethical self.

In this sense, Butler's 'ethical turn' should not be seen as diverting us from the 'political' (cf. Honig, 2010; Schulman, 2011). To the extent that Butler's (2005) ethical subjection is never an individualized process — as in Foucault (1984) (see McNay, 2009) — as it is centred on the recognition of the inter-subjective vulnerability and the openness and responsiveness towards the other, that politics and social transformation remain possible (Lloyd, 2015; McNay, 2009). Moreover, if we take seriously that the 'uptake of ethical openness and generosity is a matter of resisting those practices of organizing that deny or oppress difference and/or privilege certain modes of identity' (Pullen & Rhodes, 2013, p. 783), then we come to understand the very emergence of the moral subject that is generous by virtue of the relation as a form of ethico-political resistance to neoliberal academia. Albeit one that comes with a high price for the gendered individual, such subject calls into question neoliberal governance that leverages a masculine subject at the cost of otherness and generosity (Diprose, 2002). The recognition of such a relational ethics, constitutive of the feminine subjectivity, is needed in order to redirect and subvert the idea of autonomous and self-directive subjectivities that is currently prominent in academia (Demeritt, 2000; Devine et al., 2011; Nikunen, 2014) and organizational ethics more broadly (Fotaki & Harding, 2018).

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## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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