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Hiding in plain sight: Tactical concealment as a complex pathway to relational wellbeing

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Article

***Hiding in Plain Sight*: Exploring the Complex Pathways Between Tactical Concealment and Relational Wellbeing**

Abstract

We argue that the current environment in higher education is one of the primary drivers for the widespread adoption of concealment tactics with the aim of enhancing wellbeing. To explore the relationship between concealment and wellbeing, we draw upon Scott's (1990) conceptualization of 'hidden transcripts' and Keyes's (1998, 2002) five dimensions of social wellbeing. Using a collaborative ethnographic approach, we examine a two-year period of individual and collective inquiry by an eclectic multidisciplinary, international group of academics. Our empirical and theoretical contributions expose a complex and, at times, seemingly contradictory relationship between tactical concealments and relational wellbeing, with variously generative and destructive pathways between them. Our research offers a lens through which we can critically explore and extend our understanding of alternative pathways to wellbeing in organizational life.

Introduction

> *"My fatigue and wariness with my academic job had become overwhelming. And then I realised that there are better ways – to live, to work – to find people to surround myself with who are capable and uplifting…. and indeed, the burden of work shifted from 'I' to 'we'. And, yet, I feel that I have to conceal these supportive, restorative working relationships. I guard them from those in my institution who would drain our energy/time/resources and 'water down' our restorative space and productivity - those who would take without sharing and diminish rather than grow."*
>
> *Excerpt from one of our autoethnographic accounts.*

This paper represents a collective academic response to what we view as a damaging institutional narrative of wellbeing within higher education (HE) (Dale and Burrell, 2014; Smith and Ulus, 2020). The academics here represent an eclectic group from different career stages, disciplines, and countries including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. We met in January 2020 and embarked on a collective autoethnographic journey, virtually, over the course of what would prove to be an unimaginably challenging two years. Our emergent remit was to explore the perceived challenges in our environments that altered our sense of wellness during various stages of our respective careers. There was an initial shared view around how the performative drive for individual accountability and competition within the academy has diminished the treatment of wellbeing to a prescriptive institutional exercise focusing on the responsibility of the individual. Our framing echoed a shared experience of a pervasive neoliberal institutional and managerialist agenda that perpetuates structural inequalities (Mitchell, 2022) and which has resulted in a "erosion of the social and relational" (White, 2017: 122).

The individualist view of wellbeing is expressed within the messages in many academic institutions that wellbeing is a priority ethos (van Houtum and van Uden, 2020). Recent empirical work exposes the ways in which the current managerial apparatus persists in delivering work intensification, despite public cases of emotional and physical damage to academic workers (Kintsugi Collective, 2021). This apparatus is so deeply entangled in daily life, it has normalized the fast-paced environment of modern academe in which senior leadership is both disconnected and intolerant (McCann et al. 2020). As such, it is a cultural taboo to talk openly about emotions, vulnerability, and personal issues or crises in wellbeing within universities (Askins and Blazek, 2017; Elraz, 2017). This is particularly significant as the academic sector has a higher propensity for an individual to develop a mental health problem compared with other working populations (Guthrie et al. 2017).

Within this context, it is not surprising that academics' hidden struggles with their mental health are shrouded by a culture of silence at institutional levels (Gabriel, 2012). Baum and Critcher (2020: 73) have described concealment as a "ubiquitous aspect of interpersonal life" and evidence demonstrates that it is often negatively associated with wellbeing (see review in Larson et al. 2015). Here, we define concealment as a psychological construct that 'motivates secrecy behaviors' through the "active concealment of consciously accessible' and 'personal' information" (Uysal, 2020: p.122). Such concealment is tied to complicity with institutional hegemony, resulting in self-defeating, yet addictive entrapments for the sake of a temporary reward (Bloom, 2019).

As a critical response, however, we wanted to explore the dynamics of concealment beyond reactive survival, complicity, and short-term fixes. As such, we focus on tactical concealment, which we view as an individual's intention to hide meaningful practices for political purposes. This draws on de Certeau's (1988) notion of 'tactics', in contrast to 'strategies', where the latter is the overarching institutional framework, in contrast to the former, which represent those actions in everyday activities. This alternative perspective on concealment is chosen because it encompasses a searching out and enacting of practices to assert our care and generosity for ourselves and each other, recognizing both vulnerability and marginalization as critical components of this experience (Jones et al. 2020). This form of tactical concealment follows research by Smith et al. (2018) who argue that the synonym of concealment, social invisibility, can be the result of a principled choice, carefully conceived and consciously pursued through ethically informed personal action and politically informed collective action.

This paper thereby responds to Smith and Ulus's (2020) call for more critical studies by connecting individual voices around concealment across an eclectic, geographically diverse body of academics with different positionalities and aspirations. We seek to both embody the humanist hope expressed by van Houtum and van Uden (2020), who argue for values of trust, exchange, and collaboration to enhance individual and collective wellbeing, and respond to calls for examining wellbeing through the lens of relationality (White and Jha, 2020). We agree that "If a significant part of the harms of late modern society derive from its erosion of the

social, then it follows that an alternative approach to wellbeing must be relationally grounded" (ibid: 207). More specifically, we seek to unmask the critical tensions and various pathways between concealment and social wellbeing. Drawing from the following conceptual underpinnings and our own discussions, our emergent enquiry is thereby framed around the following research question: *How and why could tactical concealment be enacted to enhance social wellbeing?*

Conceptual Underpinning: Tactical Concealment for Social Wellbeing

Prior research alludes to the possibility that academics can carefully craft 'veiled' self-reflexive tactics to resist managerial forces and create alternative futures (Mumford et al. 2020). As Smith et al. (2018: 54) argue, "invisibility can also be the result of strategies carefully conceived and consciously pursued… acquired by ethically informed personal action as well as by politically informed collective action". In this sense, evidence suggests that concealment can be used as a purposeful pre-figurative strategy to protect one's identity (Oliver, 1991; Petriglieri, 2011) and assert equality back onto the neoliberal system with an emancipatory tone (Vestergren et al. 2019). In support of this, drawing on a qualitative meta-synthesis on identity, Adler and Lalonde (2020) position concealment practices as a 'conformist 'façade' that academics exhibit as a process of "symbolically conforming to institutional demands and avoiding direct confrontation with the institution, while maintaining mental distance to protect themselves internally and from the deleterious effects of managerialism on their identity" (p.137).

We take inspiration from White (2017) to propose and animate an alternative recasting of wellbeing which is not only relational, but also hidden. Our conceptual apparatus simultaneously repositions the role of tactical concealment as potentially generative for wellbeing (as implied by van Houtum and van Uden, 2020) and counters the prescriptive and mechanized rendering of wellbeing which is characteristic of managerialist ideology (Jones et al. 2020). Towards this theoretical ambition, we draw from Scott's (1990) notion of 'hidden transcript' which describes the relatively 'invisible' forms of resistance deployed by marginalized groups that might lack the resources to publicly declare their resistance, or who face devastating consequences if they did. A hidden transcript "represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (ibid: xii), that is, "avoids any open declaration of its intentions" (Scott, 1990: 220). Hidden transcripts provide, according to earlier work by Anderson (2008), a productive lens to describe the range and diversity of hidden resistances that are typical in higher education.

Theoretically, Scott's (1990) proposition advances that hidden transcripts are not just functional social practices. Rather, they are generative through the specific dynamics associated with being able to express – with like-minded others – what is otherwise denied in the face of the dominant. There are three interconnected dimensions to this dynamic: social-mutuality, enactment of negation, and critical distance. *Social-mutuality* provides the sociocultural contextuality of a hidden transcript. Here, Scott argues that there must be a shared

cultural framework of reference for the hidden transcripts to make sense to others; it is mutuality which "ensures that they have, in their common subordination, something to talk about" (Scott, 1990: 120). In other words, social-mutuality helps articulate the forms and applications of (in)visibility (cf., Lewis and Simpson, 2010), which might be seen as "right" or "wrong" within a cultural setting, and how this informs strategic sense-making, deployment of (in)visibility, and wellbeing (Stead, 2013, p.76). *Enactment of negation* refers to what is denied in every hidden transcript – the public announcement or expression of the disproval of the dominant. According to Scott (1990: 115), a hidden transcript "always remains a substitute for an act of assertion directly in the face of power", so it embodies a fundamental negation. This substitute could include, for example, speech acts to respond to the powerful in a safe space. But it can also be counter-ideological in that the practices themselves can oppose the dominant acts or behaviors in and around an organization.

Finally, *critical distance,* Scott (1990) argues, is the sequestered nature of the space which enables people to talk and act 'freely', requiring "insulat[ion] from control and surveillance from above" (p. 118). As Marche (2012: 9) asserts, "the evasive capacity of infrapolitics is critical to its efficacy: the less clearly its message and meaning can be pinned down, the more effectively it can undermine domination". Such distance can have socio-tempo-material dimensions, such as 'secret assemblies' creating spaces for conversations between formal meetings, when workers are off-duty, or in socially remote locations. Importantly, Scott (1990: 121) reminds us that these sites "might, however, not require any physical distance from the dominant so long as linguistic codes, dialects, and gestures-opaque to the masters and mistresses-were deployed". Concealment, therefore, can be positioned as a 'skillful navigation' of an intimate understanding of institutional power structures (Smith et al. 2018).

Hidden transcripts can also be productively utilized to enhance wellbeing on the theoretical grounds that hidden transcripts are, according to Scott (1990), fueled by, and reinforced through, a shared sense of mutuality which is generative to a relational form of wellbeing (White, 2017). This assertion is an extension of Anderson's (2008) application of hidden transcripts, describing hidden practices in higher education. Further, this conceptualization foregrounds the role of relationality in organizational action and the complexities of how such interactional specificities materialize through public and private settings (e.g. Mumford et al. 2020). As it relates to wellbeing, such (inter)relationality has been found to be a pathway to positive affect and sense of belonging at the individual level (Pena López et al. 2021). This view contrasts with a conceptualization of wellbeing as hedonic, which is individually framed and constituted as state-like affective experience or subjective life satisfaction (Vestergren et al. 2019).

In contrast, we draw on Keyes's (1998, 2002) objection to wellbeing as a primarily individual and private phenomenon and adopt his relationally constructed alternative which defines wellbeing as "an appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society" (Keyes, 1998: 122). He argues that "Individuals are functioning well when they see society as meaningful and understandable, when they feel they belong to and are accepted by their communities, when they accept most parts of society, and when they see themselves contributing to society" (Keyes, 2002: 209). Specifically, Keyes' five dimensions of social wellbeing are: *social integration* (a

sense of having something in common with others), *social acceptance* (a sense of feeling at ease with others), *social contribution* (a sense of value of oneself to a wider society), *social actualization* (a sense of hope or potential that society will develop and grow), and *social coherence* (a sense of knowing and meaning in life) (Keyes, 2002).

When hidden transcripts and social wellbeing are theoretically juxtaposed in this way, we contend that tactical concealment can be viewed as a potentially generative mechanism through which (in)visibility is enacted through hidden transcripts (where there is mutuality, negation, and critical distance) as a relationally - and situationally - learned proactive assertion of, and for, social wellbeing in academic environments.

Research Methodology

Mason's (2004: 178) insights regarding the importance of "people's connectivity with others" in the process of generating accounts of experience informed our approach to collective storytelling using collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Belkhir et al. 2019). One of the strengths of our group was the diversity across multiple dimensions, providing us with an opportunity to engage "otherness" as we consider multiple lenses used and share interpretations (Hibbert et al., 2019). Although each of us lives in an English-speaking country and works in a business school, we differ in terms of countries of origin (which include Canada, India, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States), career stages (which range from senior lecturer to full professor), gender mix, ages (which range from mid-40s to mid-70s), industry and consulting experience, disciplinary backgrounds, and areas of research (which include project management, gender and diversity, creativity and arts, education, community engagement, sustainability and the natural environment, entrepreneurship, and small business financing). Despite our differences, we developed an immediate connection with each other when we met at research conference in New Zealand in early 2020, sharing the perceived challenges that altered our sense of wellness during various stages of our respective careers. Through initial storying, we realized that we shared a collective interest in exploring the concept of concealment in academia and its impact on our wellbeing. This became the rationale for what became a virtual journey of collective discovery in which we shared stories about our own tactical concealments - the hows and whys of each - and the outcomes we interpreted as resulting from them.

In terms of charting this journey, we were fortunate to have two members on our team with extensive experience using CAE. They became the shepherds for our data collection process, which was purposeful, intentional, grounded in CAE best practice, and carefully scrutinized and approved by a university Human Research Ethics Committee. CAE involves all researchers-as-participants to "individually and collaboratively [reflect] upon a particular phenomenon" (Garbati and Rothschild, 2016: 4) which, in our case, was the relationship between tactical concealment and wellbeing. Reflecting on the analytic-evocative spectrum, our research aligns with the contention that these approaches are not mutually exclusive (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012). As such, our aim was to both present a confessional tale and retain narrative visibility underpinned by reflexivity, that is, a process which exposes contradictions, doubts, dilemmas, and transformative possibilities (Cunliffe, 2002). This

transformative intention was central to our aims in this project, as we were mindful of Rhodes' (2009: 663) cautioning that reflexivity should not become a researcher narcissistic reflection, but rather be mobilized to "destabilize the very contours of truth as institutionalized". Aligned with a reflexive transformative approach, our research process was rhizomatic – encompassing a fluid and evolving state which, over time, enabled organic growth, freedom, and openness. We welcomed the opportunity to engage in personal reflection and vulnerable sharing which stimulated creative discussion and expansionist theorizing.

Following our time together at the face-to-face conference in early 2020, our research took place at regular intervals (two-hour meetings on average every two weeks) through a virtual medium over the course of two years – a routine which was governed by reflective sharing. At each phase of our research, we paused to reflect on what we were finding and then, using our CAE experts as guides, collectively decided on the design of each subsequent phase. This approach aligns with an ontology of transparency, trustworthiness, and authenticity (Pitard, 2017), and encourages relatability and trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Key phases of the research process are described below which, when examined along with excerpts of the collaborative design process of each phase, showcase a naturalistic relationship between our theoretical underpinnings, data collection, and analysis.

Phase 1: Writing and analyzing individual stories of concealment:

With an agreed upon focus of exploring the "how and why" of our tactical concealments and associated wellness outcomes, we asked each of the authors to write an historically accurate reflective essay with descriptive examples from their own lived experiences regarding concealment and wellbeing. Once circulated, we discussed reflections, shared themes, and differences across our experiences at our next session.

Phase 2: Writing and analyzing collective stories of concealment:

In Phase 2, utilizing our guided, collaborative decision-making approach, we decided to group ourselves into three self-defined career stages: early career, middle career, and late career. This became a device to not only capture the sense making of our experiences but also make sense of our collective stories in relation to each other (emerald and Carpenter, 2015). The emergent groups were comprised of two to three people, each focusing on a career stage within which the group members identified. It is pertinent to note that this grouping process was self-selecting, as we wanted to move beyond rigid criteria, such as the number of years within a particular academic position or the 'titles' that had been bestowed upon us by our colleagues and institutions. This was significant as our issue with the current dominant academic career progression model is that people are pigeonholed into a particular career level and fixed transition path, which may not correspond with an individual's own feelings and assessments.

Each group was tasked with using the themes from the original vignettes to collectively create an integrated story around one of three career stages: early, mid, or late career. The collective stories were written with two overarching aims: (1) integrate similar experiences into singular, representative examples to reduce data redundancy while retaining contextual and descriptive richness and (2) adapt our experiences into an anonymous format to protect the identities of

the authors. As in the previous stage, we then circulated our collective stories, and met to discuss the process for Phase 3.

Phase 3: Voicing, reflecting, and analyzing our collective stories within our career stage

To develop a collective analytical process for Phase 3, we took turns reading our collective stories aloud (one per session), and collaboratively reflected on themes representing what was different and what we shared, based on our varied positionalities. We decided that each group representing a different stage would identify as a different fictional character – for early career this was 'Suziona', middle career was 'Torvid', and late career was 'Shampeg'. This stage was significant as we began to reflect upon what we were learning from each other to inform not only our understanding of concealment practices and outcomes within our own career stage, but also how we could use this knowledge to convey meaning and shared experience with academics at all stages.

Phase 4: Sensemaking check and thematic discovery

This stage offered an alterity to our naturalistic approach, in which any initial findings were reflected upon by having each member of the group revisit the primary qualitative data to check whether the themes emerging from this analysis matched the themes from our more dialogical approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This opened up a way of critically reflecting upon our plurality of voices, with the goal of ensuring that every author's impressions, feelings, and reactions to the data were shared, heard, and validated. We were careful to both respect and celebrate each member's contributions in this stage, so that they added to, rather than detracted from, the emergent, organic process of collaborative and generative autoethnographic storytelling and discovery.

Our focus was on inviting consideration of the stories. As such, we strove to identify memorable, powerful, and evocative experiences that resulted in our own tactical concealments; we then pushed ourselves to explore the "how" and "why" underlying each one. With respect to the "how" of our concealments, we considered our experiences through the lens of Scott's (1990) dimensions of hidden transcripts (social-mutuality, enactment of negation, and critical distance) searching for the origins of our tactical concealments. We then re-examined our data using Keyes's (1998, 2002) five dimensions of social wellness (social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence), trying to unearth the things we were longing for and working so hard to embrace as our own. This was a two-part discovery of the "whys" of our concealments, revealing the ways in which our hidden transcripts and related concealments helped us enact social wellbeing; we identified both story-specific themes to describe our motivations (e.g., fear, frustration, awareness) as well as applicable dimensions of Keyes's (1998) social wellbeing. Following a discussion of our individual thoughts and findings, we shared our views and asked questions about the other members' transitions between tactical concealment and social wellbeing. In doing this, we shifted our focus from within career stage to across career stages; we strove to identify what it was we were learning from our stories, when taken together, in a search for themes that would apply to all academics in today's challenging institutional environments.

Findings / Analysis

The analysis of our shared stories revealed a dynamic and multifaceted relationship between concealment practices and wellbeing for the members of our group. In our search to understand the specific ways in which tactical concealment can be enacted to enhance social wellbeing, we discovered that the relationship between the two is more complex than anticipated, including both generative and destructive pathways.

Early career concealments

For the early career academics, concealment tactics included engaging in networks of colleagues with similar precarious work situations which would not typically permit them to undertake the type of research they wanted to do. They saw themselves as 'misfits' in their institutional and departmental groups and chose to spend time with each other at undisclosed meetings in hidden locations. Here, the 'coffee colleagues' became a collective with shared grievances and activity (*social mutuality*), negating the palpable pressures to research in particular ways with particular people (*negation*), in casual coffee-shops and at home, away from formal spaces of work (*critical distance*). In exemplifying how concealment related to their sense of social wellbeing, one early career academic said:

> *Like me, my 'coffee colleagues' are also on teaching contracts and we are all trying to strategize how we might collectively help each other develop our portfolios. Our first tentative (and careful) forays into meeting for causal coffee have since developed into supportive relationships that set the foundation for interdisciplinary and reflective projects that fuel me/us and provide my/our 'work' with meaning. We have also gone on to develop small research teams with trusted colleagues who work at other universities. We are all 'misfits' in the business school and met during our PhD study. We are learning together, sharing ways to retain our criticality, whilst still 'appearing' as though we are playing the game. We share our insights as though engaged in subterfuge, supporting each other, engaging in collaborative writing partly to honor our research intentions, and partly to provide each other job security. We rotate 'authorship order' to ensure that every member has the required 'firsts' to ensure employability. We work in opposition to the neoliberal university; we share the workload and the fruits of our work; we are less concerned about who 'does what work', because at times, we have all carried and been carried by the members of the group. Our ethic is one of collective protection and care. Indeed, this seems like we are doing what we set out to do: focus on creating genuinely meaningful knowledge within an environment shaped by collegiality, concern, and support. Yet, we guard this space. This sacred space of rest and productivity.*

Using the language of Keyes' (1998), the hidden collectives of like-minded 'misfits' are associated with desperately needed *social acceptance* through the support, trust, and kindness members shared with each other in these groups. The authors experienced *social integration*, feeling like they were a part of a hidden society and guarding it as such. It was only in these

small, concealed research group interactions that they felt they could safely share things they could not with their departmental and institutional colleagues. Disclosing vulnerable, yet meaningful, plans and ideations led them to experience *social contribution* – genuine affirmations that they individually and collectively had 'something of value to give the world' (Keyes, 1998: 122).

This generativity ran parallel to a seemingly destructive subservience to play the academic 'publish or perish' game, albeit with a marginal sense of autonomy about how they enacted their productivity. Their compliance extended itself into a feeling of invisibility which ran throughout their institutional interactions and was associated with a complex and defeatist self-doubt. For example, in departmental and organizational meetings they sensed pressure to sit and be silent, to conceal who they 'really are'. The helplessness and discomfort experienced evoked further concealment practices as we see in these reflections:

> *And at the same time I am 'encouraged' to be 'silent' about shifting goal posts that I can't even see – and/or endure/hear/reproduce concealment phrases: 'we/you/I am/are so lucky to have this privileged job'. Indeed, I love my job, but I do not love being denied promotion because of not meeting (the new) publication count, while simultaneously receiving (concealed insofar as I am the only one who hears the) verbal 'thanks' for all my 'extra' (taking-one-for-the-team) teaching, and (revealed, insofar as it is on my HR record) written threats stating that I need to pick up my publication game. But why should 'taking-one-for-the-team' (by performing concealed work) cost me and my family so much in terms of our time together, (my) ill health, job insecurity, and inability to be promoted (aka, lost income)?*

> *My deepest (professional) concealment is my constant attempt to hide my sense of intellectual and technical incompetence. Both are regularly exposed and at the same time, entangled with my living with imposter syndrome and the feeling of never quite being able to get 'there', or get 'it' out there quick enough. And while I am struggling, it appears to me that others seemingly excel in their work…. Are they excelling or are they concealing their not-quite-there-ness too?*

> *I will never talk to my permanently employed (and significantly more esteemed) colleagues about my/our research. For them, as they have made abundantly clear to me, worthwhile research is disciplinary, often quantitative, and certainly not challenging the tenants of the very institution we belong to. If asked in a tokenized way at a departmental meeting about my current research, I have learned to simply say 'oh, I'm working on some things' – and then listen to the 'real researchers' at the table detail each mainstream project they are working on, while I spend my time concealing. Yet, my projects fuel me, and provide my 'work' with meaning. This is not simply 'imposter syndrome' – in my first few weeks, a senior faculty member in my area referred to a colleague who had recently left as 'into that feminist crap'. What was I to make of this, given it is one of the key strands of my research?*

Another area in which our members shared reflections about concealments that were both generative and destructive to wellbeing related to navigating the (im)balance between work pressures and productivity and their ability to support, and yet (not) be integral and engaged members of, their families:

> *I love this privileged job of mine, with its unforgiving publish or perish regime, growing administrative roles, and expanding teaching loads. So much so, I work several evenings a week and most weekends just to keep up; a fact I conceal from my colleagues least I appear incompetent. I do love my job, and working long hours does mean I can contribute to the financial wellbeing of my family, and hopefully my dedication will lead to a secure permanent position. Needless to say, the long hours also mean I have very little time to spend with and take care of my family or myself, and I am often exhausted and ill. Sometimes I wonder if, in the long term, my family might leave me because I am very rarely 'present' and rather than lose them, I toy with the idea of quitting. Even more worrying, my son admonished me the other day by saying 'don't let the job kill you mum', in response to yet another weekend at work. I just do not know what to do with this entangled sense of great joy and deep vulnerability between my work and home lives.*

As we see in the excerpts above, our early career authors described feeling scared, isolated, and fractured in an environment where they perceived immense pressure to be exceptional at everything. It is no wonder, drawing upon their experiences, positionality, and institutional contexts, that for these authors their search for wellness involved a continued, complex, and exhausting focus on concealments with dual and seemingly contradictory elements. To find safe, productive, wellness-oriented environments, they had to immerse themselves in 'playing the game' of meeting institutionally prescribed requirements for success while simultaneously *hiding in plain sight* as they distanced themselves from their departments and institutions with others sharing limited positional power. As a result of these complex concealment journeys, their stories revealed both generative paths resulting in increased wellbeing through *social integration, acceptance*, and *contribution* as well as destructive and damaging paths resulting in weariness, drudgery, feelings of invisibility, fears of losing their loved ones, and recognition that the slivers of hope they find exist only in the margins of their unchanging working lives.

Middle career concealments

The middle career authors shared stories which reflected the political agency of tactical concealment to resist managerialist practices whilst being seen to comply with the aim of eliciting social wellbeing. Drivers of their tactical concealments included understanding and owning counter-normative identities (*critical distance* and *social mutuality*) and the use of deceptive and deflective practices (*negation*). Recognizing through their hidden transcripts that they were searching for *social mutuality,* stories revealed veiled paths to people who were similar in their refusal to normalize and exhibit their institutional expectations and mandates. In reflecting on their pathways to wellbeing, one author explains:

I reflect upon the fact that my double life as a Head of Department required a considerable degree of concealment, as I would certainly not be welcomed into the fold by senior management if I showed all my cards, straight away at least. One example of this is an initiative which turned out to be my sanity: 'The Shoreside Sessions". This gave me the opportunity to try to implement the ideas I had been writing about for several years, around prioritizing academic wellbeing through a political, spatial and temporal disconnection to the university. In terms of the political concealment, I specifically invited external academics who were not only leading in their field, but also exuded a passion and love for their research. Their so-called research reputation provided a performative legitimacy for the sessions in the eyes of senior management, but opened up a different counter-performative way of portraying research as a way of being, rather than a commodity to be audited.

In terms of the spatial and temporal aspects, as the name suggests, the Shoreside Sessions were held in a hotel in a beachside location, utilizing the local ecological environment as a collegiate meeting space and place, to contrast with the corporatized offices and bland teaching rooms of our university. A slow rhythm was enacted through a greater playful, dialogical focus within monthly sessions lasting over a half day. The overall aim here was to move away from the mad dash for individual disciplinary excellence and to slowly craft a context which allows for thinking and feeling differently, through a gradual appreciation of discounted knowledge, vulnerability, and redundancy.

In yet another evocative and illustrative excerpt of how concealment was used to generate wellness, a middle career author shares:

This was the start of my research group, where I (and others) grew through project after project and collaboration after collaboration. It was exciting how more and more people were getting involved in activities and projects which were fundamentally about collective creativity, compassion, and capability. One project intentionally practiced collective connection in writing huddles, using creative writing practices, and placed our attention on how such practices shaped our individual and collective feelings of wellbeing. Another project used sketching practices in collaborative research projects. Another took place in a (gastro) pub where we theorized on napkins, constrained only by our imagination and the stock of napkins. We felt a sense of meaning and togetherness in the flow of our creativity out of sight, unrestricted by the judgmental critiques of our respective managers. All of the projects disregarded departmental and faculty boundaries; people from all over the university engaged (the last few projects were exclusively externally focused). The projects essentially valued and promoted play, unorthodox practices, and our collective creative capacities. I have carefully and intentionally concealed the activities of the research group – primarily externally funded projects – from my manager (and management).

Through these concealed partnerships, the authors experienced wellness through *social coherence* and *social contribution*. The collaborations were freeing in terms of novel, co-created approaches to research and engagement as well as welcoming of counter-normative social and political stances. For one of our authors, the experiences of social wellness exacerbated their frustrations with institutional managerialism, leading them become part of the managerial team. Here, they recount aspirations for the tactical concealment:

> *My reason for finally agreeing to take on a managerial role was to utilize the positional power such a role affords, not in a performative sense, but in a counter performative direction. This derived from maintaining my own identity work, coming from a critical management studies background. Could the meaning of academic work move beyond purely critique and resistance, towards how such critique could lead to individual and collective emancipatory agency? Furthermore, could such agency change the institutional structure at all, particularly around managerialism? As you can imagine, such grand personal goals were not embedded in my performance objectives and appraisals. What seemed to be the expectations of my role could be deciphered by the performative language used within my conversations with senior management: excellence, targets, metrics, accreditation, outcomes etc. My new front stage role seemed to be about prioritizing such language above all else. I was expected to join the rhetoric around tokenizing collegiality, interdisciplinarity, well-being, sustainability, and equality through tick boxes to gain external legitimacy, rather than to change what seemed like fundamentally insecure practices.*

Once again, in both of these stories, we see tactical concealment used to produce outcomes reinforcing the institutional imperative of 'legitimate' activity. However, unlike our early career authors, our middle career authors strove for resistance and renewal, enacted through tactical and political concealment practices. Here, they were using concealment to create generative pathways to *social coherence* and *social contribution*, but these effects were complicated by the reality that these same concealments were associated with compromised impacts on *social acceptance* and *social actualization*. All authors are *hiding in plain sight*, working to create pathways to wellness with embedded contradictory and dualistic agendas. However, unlike our early career authors, our middle career authors are doing it audaciously and provocatively, embracing simultaneous goals of shaping positive institutional change and enhancing social wellbeing.

Late career concealments

Our three self-described late career academics shared reflections that encompassed aspects of the themes we saw in the early and middle career stories, both in the presence of tactical concealment and in its utilization for own or others' wellbeing. In exploring their own tactical concealments, our late career academics ruminated over a wide range of practices they used impacting their own and others' wellbeing:

I too had found an interesting niche for my research, and assembled a network of support, only to have senior faculty and administration dismiss my work as insignificant and without impact. It didn't matter to me anymore. I would research what I wanted and publish it in places I found engaging and meaningful to the larger academic community of which I was now a well-established and respected part. In getting to this point, I recalled the battles I had chosen or been chosen for, and which hills I decided to die on, academically speaking. I knew administrative positions would suck the life out of my very being, but to be seen as a player I sought out, and in some cases was asked to accept, key positions. I was praised for my skill in these positions, but they were always a ball and chain. I reflected on my concealment at each stage – concealment of my insecurities and failures, concealment of my resistance and rebellion as I built capacity, and concealment of my contentment which I now realized masked a myriad of unaddressed concerns.

Well established in their profession, our late career academics shared their positive experiences of having a high degree of leeway in choosing projects which afforded them tactically concealed ways to 'build capacity' (e.g. the mentoring of junior staff); these projects allowed them to experience a sense of *social contribution*. Yet, at the same time, they revealed the continued presence of demoralizing and damaging consequences of using tactical concealment as a pathway to wellbeing – the 'battles' chosen, the 'hills to die on', the roles they accepted which 'suck the life out of my being' so they could be accepted as fitting in, and a defeatist acceptance of a profession in which they were continuously encumbered by a metaphorical 'ball and chain'. In their reflections, we see tactical concealment generating wellbeing on the one hand (e.g., *social contribution*), yet associated with negative consequences to wellbeing on the other. On the destructive side, they experienced both compromised *social acceptance* through questions regarding their fit with the faculty and administrative teams around them, as well as compromised *social actualization* through a realization that they had could have achieved more (i.e., their 'contentment' which masked a 'myriad of unaddressed concerns'). Simultaneously, however, such reflections prompted further exploration and reflection about the complexities of their concealment-wellbeing relationships:

As we slowly walked away from the conference venue the conversation shifted to our institutions, the evolution of the academy, and our frustrations. I felt the re-awakening of an internal pull I felt many times over the past decades - I needed, and wanted, to help guide and support them. I had done this many times in my career and knew that one of the greatest contributions I could give to the world was to work with, guide, and simultaneously learn from early and middle career academics. I wanted it. I needed it to feel whole. I had been lost in the madness of work – the politics, the pressures, the inanity of it all – but I genuinely wanted to help them be less blind as they navigated their journeys. I believed I could contribute, in at least a small way, to make that possible.

The above reflection is a powerful illustration of our late career authors' drivers for concealment. In the example above, we see a desire to craft a shared sociocontextual framework and understanding with junior colleagues (*social mutuality*) whom they viewed as needing protection and guidance, thus creating what they perceived as a survival-driven *critical distance* from their damaging institutional culture. In doing this, they saw themselves as 'guides' sharing wisdom about how to 'be less blind' as they navigate the complex and challenging socio-political waters of an academic career (*enactment of negation*). The pervasive nature of these drivers for concealment can be seen in the existential nature of some of our late career authors' reflections:

> *Was my career, and my academic being, a building or simply a facade? Had I become a professional dissembler? Our conversation jarred me. Who am I really? What will I do if I'm not at the university? What haven't I done that I need to? How much of "me" is inextricably tied to this role? Recently the university offered redundancy packages in response to budget cuts. Some of my close colleagues bailed, but I didn't. I convinced myself that I had things to finish – books and papers in various stages, PhD students to supervise to completion, a large research grant to fulfil, and outstanding contributions to the numerous committees I serve on. There is so much confusion and contradiction. I wonder, how much of our academic world has changed forever? Have our systems become so damaged and impersonal that we, as individuals, contribute nothing to the larger academic environment? The question smacked me in the face - how much of what I love is still a part of what I do? I became so comfortable concealing parts of myself with others over the years, how much concealment have I done to myself?*

As we see throughout their reflections, without intending to, the late career authors explored the extent to which their concealments resulted in both generative and destructive pathways to wellbeing; they experienced these relationships as rife with contradiction and duality. These authors had the positionality and power needed to create meaningful change, and yet they had learned to do this by navigating their institutions' social and political systems. Reflection brought awareness and understanding that was fraught with concern and despair. Social wellbeing was possible, but only through counter-normative behavior. They were invested in their academic journeys, and helping others to do the same, yet they believed the institutional environments and systems around them were broken. They found themselves *hiding in plain sight*, with seemingly unanswerable questions about their levels of social contribution and actualization.

Discussion: Towards an Understanding of the Complex Pathways Between Tactical Concealment and Relational Wellbeing

Contrary to discourses of concealment as being detrimental to wellness (e.g. Larson et al. 2015; Afifi and Afifi, 2020) or shameful (Askins and Blazek, 2017; Elraz, 2017; Smith and Ulus, 2020), our findings lead to our first contribution; tactical concealment can be used to enact relational forms of wellbeing in academic life. Our findings contribute to the emerging

evidence and theorization of relational forms of wellbeing by highlighting that relational wellbeing, along with its roots and impact, can be relatively *hidden*. In these settings, we contend that the current theorization of relational wellbeing does not provide enough descriptive or explanatory poignancy in relation to tactical concealment.

Relational wellbeing has been theorized as emerging through and across the interaction of three interrelated dimensions of personal, societal, and environmental (White, 2017; White and Jha, 2020). We extend this conceptualization to include tactical concealment as an example of a specific practice which illustrates the complexities of this interrelationship, and present data that support the conceptual emergence of a relationship between Scott's (1990) 'hidden transcripts' and Keyes's (1998, 2002) dimensions of social wellbeing. We identify how these two interrelated theoretical contributions help us understand the stimuli for tactical concealments (social mutuality, negation, and critical distance) and the dimensions of social wellbeing (social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence) as components of the complex, and often contradictory, emergent pathways between tactical concealment on relational wellbeing.

We have found that these additional aspects demonstrably function to help describe how people navigate (or feel propelled) into alternative social groups ('societal') and spaces ('environment'), where self ('personal') can be sensed differently for alternative experiences of wellbeing. For example, our extended theoretical apparatus helps to better describe and explain how the early career authors created a new sense of social integration, acceptance, and contribution by finding a shared, secret society of 'coffee misfits'. These were not isolated concealment practices but examples from a series of additional and consequential concealments around academic identities to 'sit and be silent'. By surfacing middle and late career academic experiences, we map these tactical concealment practices and associated effects on relational wellbeing even in contexts where the academic has greater positional power.

The second contribution is surfacing the complexities and contradictions found in the relationship between tactical concealment and relational wellbeing. We observe this first in the way we may think we are concealing to resist the performative imperative, but invariably we see those concealments operating to effectively deliver performance (albeit, at times and in some contexts, with a greater sense of autonomy). We also see this contradictory character in the way tactical concealments may simultaneously deliver specific relational wellbeing *gains* (e.g. social integration with work colleagues), as well as relational wellbeing *losses* (e.g. social disintegration with family unit). In other words, tactical concealment does not provide a guaranteed pathway to relational wellbeing, rather, it offers an unstable one, with simultaneous and variable impacts on aspects of relational wellbeing.

Our contributions are important because they provide roots and gestures to consider the support "academics need to withstand the voices of critique, rejection and failure that are becoming louder within the neo-liberal context" and to "become confident to talk back to the emotional and bodily stressors of performativity and marketization whilst acting for the public good" (emerald and Carpenter, 2015: 187). There is a fine margin as to whether tactical concealments result in outcomes that comply with the guidelines and performative

goal structures of institutions, following an individually located sense of agency (Adler and Lalonde, 2020). Tactical concealment for generating relational wellbeing may well be characterized as an individualistic form of pragmatic agency and is therefore vulnerable to Adler and Lalonde's (2020) concern of the sustainability of such tactics in contemporary organizations. However, our data indicate the existence of tactical concealments as both generative and destructive of relational wellbeing across a diverse group of academics from disparate geographic locations and in varying career stages.

We believe our more granular theoretical apparatus affords greater contextual nuance on why and how academics tactically conceal and has the potential to open up new conversations around the complexity and variability of drivers for relational wellbeing. The academics in this study shared reflections of behaviors exposing themes of resistance (while still conforming) for a greater sense of relational wellbeing (but still feeling the pain of doing so). Our recommendation mirrors Smith et al. (2018) who argue for a critical reflexivity around the complexity of how, why, and who we conceal with, so we can better understand the process of attaining wellbeing.

Future research might explore wellbeing as a dynamic "constellation" (White and Jha, 2020: 211) across time to illuminate the microdynamics of how relationality changes. Studies in this domain would need to include not only the normative pragmatics of individual agency such as managing time better (Adler and Lalonde, 2020), but also the sociocultural environments in which individuals develop their relationality (Pradies et al. 2021). Similarly, Olekalns et al. (2020) have explored the temporal formation of fractures in relationships, including how fractures are triggered and repaired over time. Examinations into the processes through which these fractures and repairs operate and implicate wellbeing would provide a more dynamic understanding of how academics and higher education institutions might respond with the humanist values of trust, exchange, and collaboration to enhance individual and collective wellbeing (van Houtum and van Uden, 2020).

Conclusion
As a conclusion, we invite you, the reader, to join us in utilizing narrative to re-conceptualize and re-prioritize paths towards wellbeing as journeys, as we seek to explore the complexities, contradictions, and inherent tensions of concealments tied to relational forms of wellbeing. We have written this paper with the hope that it will serve as a platform to prompt critical reflection on this relationship. It is a call for each of us to consider what we have done which negates a dominant pressure in our settings, creates critical distance in situations where we feel controlled or dominated, and, ideally, results in a new sense of social mutuality. How are our journeys shaping our sense of wellbeing in terms of social integration, acceptance, contribution, actualization, and coherence? What are the conflicts and tensions we experience as part of the complex and interconnected webs of our personal, professional, and institutional obligations and how do they help us to generate or, alternatively, destroy our wellbeing? We can think of no better starting point than joining together with you in a shared exploration of the 'hows' and 'whys' of our own, and others', journeys toward relational

wellbeing. If we are *hiding in plain sight*, then let us do it together with wellbeing as our goal and criticality, reflection, and collaboration as our guides.

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