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# OVERCOMING CONTEMPORARY ACADEMIC ATTACHMENTS: DEVELOPING EVEN-MINDEDNESS IN NEOLIBERAL CULTURES OF EXCELLENCE

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While academics are aware of the drawbacks of the neoliberalist system within institu- tions of higher education, paradoxically they are partly complicit in perpetuating it. Drawing upon Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory and a Buddhist perspective on attach- ment, we develop a Bowlby–Buddhist lens to unpack this paradox and the complicity of academics, whose *fear* and *craving* for self-excellence and careerism prompt *anxious* and *avoidant* attachments that sustain the very system they critique. These attachments confine academics to a conventional state of being, in which clinging to instrumental out- comes and metrics masks the impermanent, fundamentally unsatisfactory, and interde- pendent nature of reality. To overcome such an embodied paradox in academia, we propose a mindful response, through which academics can develop the personal power to liberate themselves from the entrapments of anxious and avoidant attachments engen- dered within neoliberal academia, affording opportunities to reinvigorate academic agency and reclaim scholarly vocation.

The dark side of academia has been exposed as a neo- liberalist system (e.g., [De Vita & Case, 2016](#_bookmark45); [Fleming,](#_bookmark57) [202](#_bookmark57)1; [Parker, 2018;](#_bookmark130) [Tourish, 2020](#_bookmark149)), with a questionable corporate economic logic shaping the quantification of teaching and research performance, as well as revenue generation ([Bobe & Kober, 2020](#_bookmark30)). This neoliberal aca- demic culture intensifies institutional pressures on aca- demics to maximize research outputs and establish their impact, promoting certain preferred epistemolo- gies and endorsed research topics (Hughes et al., 2019). These pressures have increasingly led academics to engage in the “publication game” ([Townsend, 2012](#_bookmark150)) or the “publish-or-perish game” (M[artin, 2014](#_bookmark81)), giving rise to criticisms questioning academic meritocracy

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[2023](#_bookmark59)). Why have we, as academics, been perpetuating this system? We contend that unveiling the funda- mental forms of attachment that ensnare academics in the neoliberalist academic system is important. With- out understanding what binds us to the system, it is challenging to envision meaningful change and alter- native trajectories for academic careers. Scholars have of late consistently called for the exploration of path- ways for academics to enhance awareness and take ownership of their agency ([Fleming & Harley, 2023;](#_bookmark59) Tourish, 2019) to gain the ability to overhaul manage- rialism within academia (B[illsberry, Ambrosini &](#_bookmark31) [Thomas, 2023)](#_bookmark31).

Drawing upon [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment theory and Buddhist notions of attachment, our intent is to explore the different forms of attachment that can influence behaviors within academia. In doing so, we argue that many academics are drawn into the pursuit of *self-excellence* (Davies & Peterson, 2005) and *careerism* (C[larke & Knights, 2015](#_bookmark58)) to attain security and progress in the neoliberal academic system. Driven by the *fear* of failure ([Chubb, Watermeyer &](#_bookmark46) [Wakeling, 2020](#_bookmark46)), academics can develop varying

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objects of *desire* within the higher education (HE) context to which they become unthinkingly and unre- flexively attached. These objects of desire would include, *inter alia*: the pursuit for credibility and pres- tige, or the desire to distinguish themselves and their institutions (A[dler & Harzing, 2009](#_bookmark35)). In pursuing desires, however, they often disregard the imperma- nence of perceived “successes” and “achievements”; an ignorance, if you will, that can lead, in turn, to emotional distress (depression, alienation, panic, etc.) ([Smith & Ulus, 2020](#_bookmark151)). In short, academics become participants in an HE system that fosters a vicious cycle of fear, desire, and attachment to unsta- ble goals, which, in the absence of awareness, can be self-defeating and a source of personal and collective suffering. Moreover, by succumbing to this cycle, they perpetuate the very system that contributes their suffering.

In this essay, we argue that to liberate oneself from “extreme” forms of attachment to self-excellence and careerism in academia, there is a need to expose the “self” to what Buddhism asserts is the ultimate truth of phenomena: a realization that all conditioned things are impermanent, interdependent, and, by vir- tue of their impermanence, cannot be the source of lasting satisfaction ([Nyanatiloka, 1972](#_bookmark119): 179–180). Investigation of this ultimate truth can prompt an embodied experiential recognition that craving for things that do not last is fruitless. Gradual awakening to these truths brings with it increasing levels of equa- nimity and contentment; in other words, a gradual release from the suffering caused by craving and attachment. Such release in the academic context, we contend, offers the possibility of reclaiming the schol- arly vocation that has been compromised by neolib- eral academic culture.

We introduce the practice of Buddhist mindfulness as a means of investigating academic attachments and seeking release from those that promote distress and suffering. Mindfulness practices have been examined for their potential benefits in enhancing the well- being of management students ([Kay & Young, 2022](#_bookmark99)), while the usefulness of organizational mindfulness in

U.S. business schools has been explored in terms of its ability to enhance the capacity for action and situa- tional awareness ([Ray, Baker & Plowman, 2011)](#_bookmark115). Yet, their value for investigating *academic experience* has been relatively neglected ([McDonough & Lemon,](#_bookmark100) [2018](#_bookmark100)).

Buddhist mindfulness practices specifically aim at guiding practitioners to recognize attachment as a source of suffering and to cultivate even-mindedness

caused by attachment to everyday matters ([Nyanapo-](#_bookmark120) [nika, 1962](#_bookmark120)). It facilitates one’s ability to differentiate between *mundane* (conventional) states associated with attachment to everyday entanglements and *supermundane* (ultimate) understanding that liber- ates these attachments through an apprehension of the underlying causes of suffering [(Purser & Milillo,](#_bookmark146) [2015](#_bookmark146)). This allows practitioners to recognize the impermanent and non-enduring nature of all phe- nomena. We contend that this realization affords academics the possibility of reflecting on their lives and exploring alternative choices when acting in the moment, as well as their ability to ponder medium- and longer-term career options. In these ways, mind- fulness is *one way* in which academics can reclaim their reflexivity, although we also fully acknowledge that the approach has not been without its detractors and those who see potential drawbacks in the practice (e.g., [Purser, 2018](#_bookmark145); [Walsh, 2018](#_bookmark167)).

Responding to recent calls for the need to enhance awareness of academic agency ([Fleming & Harley,](#_bookmark59) [2023;](#_bookmark59) Tourish, 2019), we seek to make three main contributions in this essay. First, by exploring and articulating the relationship between [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment theory and the Buddhist notion of nonat- tachment, we take on the theoretical challenge of rec- onciling perspectives on attachment from two very different traditions. Bowlby’s approach is founded on Western psychological and psychosocial theory, whereas Buddhist psychological philosophy hails from a non-Western system based on profoundly dif- ferent ontological and epistemological assumptions. By navigating and integrating these two terrains, we seek to demonstrate that the differing languages used to explain attachment—while superficially at odds— are, in fact, complementary. The original contribution we claim stems both from the conceptual integration we offer *and* the fact that by drawing on the Buddhist system of knowledge we are introducing readers to an approach that is infrequently used in the field of man- agement learning.

The second conceptual contribution concerns examining and understanding the dynamics of academic attachment through the integrated Bowlby– Buddhist lens that we develop. We seek to demon- strate that when there is an excessive attachment to self-excellence, fueled by the *fear* and *anxiety* of becoming peripheral ([Harding, Ford & Gough,](#_bookmark82) [2010](#_bookmark82)) within the competitive landscape of neoliberal academia, a *desire* for and attachment to careerism can arise. This shift can divert academics from a healthy foundation for scholarly engagement and

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complicity with the pervasive audit culture in the contemporary academic world. Such attachment entraps academics in a cycle that obscures the funda- mentally unsatisfactory, interdependent, and imper- manent nature of everyday academic life, further exacerbating the fear and craving that manifest in what Buddhism identifies as a conventional state of being, entrenching academics in a pursuit of valida- tion that may ultimately be unfulfilling.

Third, we propose mindfulness practice as one pos- sible pathway for academics to gain insight into their predicament and take practical steps to alleviate suf- fering and distress. This entails developing awareness of the dynamics of attachment within everyday HE contexts, discovering how craving for, and attach- ment to, objects of desire—such as career advance- ment and self-excellence—can all too readily be the source of suffering. Delving deeper into everyday aca- demic experience and developing an understanding of the unstable base on which unhealthy attachments are formed can potentially help academics release themselves from the cycle. We propose several ways for academics to (re)discover greater agency and choice within the current HE context, while also iden- tifying the boundary conditions associated with these mindfulness approaches.

Our essay takes the form of a polemic because it allows us to challenge prevailing perspectives and provoke critical thought on a complex issue. We felt it essential not only to present the issue but also to actively confront and challenge the dominant narra- tives of neoliberal cultures of excellence within aca- demia. By adopting this approach, we aim to uncover the attachments that bind individuals like us to these systems—attachments that, often unconsciously, lead to complicity in maintaining and reinforcing neolib- eral values. Through this rhetorical form, we seek to disrupt complacency within established academic structures and encourage a deeper understanding of how these attachments shape academic behavior. Ultimately, our goal is to foster a more critical and engaged approach to the subject matter, which we believe is crucial for sparking transformation in aca- demia, where these attachments continue to sustain the status quo.

In pursuit of the three contributions, the essay first discusses how academics, paradoxically, often become complicit with and perpetuate the very system they critique. We then theorize and reveal the underlying sources of this complicity by bringing together and reconciling [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) theory of attachment and Buddhist perspectives. Academics’ attachment to

in a self-defeating nexus. Lastly, we introduce a mind- ful approach that academics can adopt to investigate their own attachment to, and complicity with, the sys- tem; offering a means to overcome distressing condi- tions and open themselves to alternative possibilities and choices.

THE PARADOX OF COMPLICITY AND CRITIQUE: LIFE IN A NEOLIBERALIST ACADEMIC SYSTEM

The concept of competition was already prominent in the “pre-neoliberal” era, where emulation was regarded as a key virtue driving both artistic and aca- demic endeavors ([Crow, 2006)](#_bookmark60). By the end of the 20th century, the emphasis on excellence had largely been translated into the language of “competition” ([Hearn, 202](#_bookmark83)1: 379)—motives that gained significant influence in the 1980s. The ideological thrust of neo- liberalism saw the prioritizing of efficiency and utility in decision-making ([Aspromourgos, 198](#_bookmark43)6), and cham- pioning of the idea that competition not only enhances economic outcomes but also addresses societal chal- lenges, such as education and resource allocation ([Harvey, 200](#_bookmark84)5). This approach to decision-making, based on maximizing individual preferences, started to shape societal values, leading to a shift where per- sonal gain and efficiency were increasingly prioritized in both economic and social contexts—developments typified by, for example, the privatization of public services, deregulation of labor markets ([Harvey, 2005](#_bookmark84)), and, most importantly for the purposes of this essay, the introduction of competition within and between academic institutions ([Fotaki & Prasad, 2015](#_bookmark72)).

Business schools have embraced this societal shift by expanding operations and investments, incorpo- rating neoliberal capitalism into the curricula and teaching philosophies of certain subjects ([Fotaki &](#_bookmark72) [Prasad, 2015](#_bookmark72)), and adopting managerialism as a *modus operandi* (De Vita & Case, 2014; [Rintam€aki &](#_bookmark121) [Alvesson, 2023](#_bookmark121)). Such developments within the acad- emy have shaped an audit culture ([Deem, 1998](#_bookmark47); [Lorenz, 201](#_bookmark85)2; [Roberts, 2006;](#_bookmark131) [Spicer, Jaser & Wiertz,](#_bookmark152) [2021](#_bookmark152)) where performance measurement and auditing have become logics for organizing, facilitating the externalization of academics’ performance ([Power,](#_bookmark143) [2021](#_bookmark143)). This culture manifests in many forms within academia. These include, *inter alia*: the marketization of academic work (M[uller-Camen & Salzgeber, 2005](#_bookmark101)), whereby systems of accountability and funding require market values to be placed on academic output; the promotion of capitalistic virtues within

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development of academic gaming systems, such as, the “publication game” ([Townsend, 2012](#_bookmark150)), the “publish-or-perish game” (M[artin, 2014](#_bookmark81)), and the “research game” ([Lucas, 2006](#_bookmark86)). Taken in concert, such developments contribute to performance mea- surement systems that dictate the success of both institutions and academics (R[intam€aki & Alvesson,](#_bookmark121) [2023](#_bookmark121)). For instance, journal quality rankings compel academics to focus on publishing in top-ranked out- lets, primarily to advance the income-generation goals of HE institutions ([Mingers & Willmott, 2013](#_bookmark102)). It is not only research that is subject to marketization in HE. Teaching is measured, controlled, and homoge-

members seizing authorship credit from doctoral stu- dents (Oberlander & Spencer, 2006) or engaging in coerced co-joint-authorship ([Bedeian, Taylor &](#_bookmark24) [Miller, 2010;](#_bookmark24) [Oravec, 201](#_bookmark132)9). The freedom to write and publish when we have something to say has been hijacked by an instrumental academic system that demands that we publish as soon and as frequently as possible, preferably in high-ranking journals ([Alaka-](#_bookmark39) [vuklar, Dickson & Stablein, 201](#_bookmark39)7). As [Rynes (2007)](#_bookmark133) claims, academics can dehumanize and erode their own careers and lives by pleading powerlessness in choosing what, when, how, and where they research. These negative effects on academic life have been

nized ([Marginson & Considine, 2000](#_bookmark87)) by student satis-

documented as compromising well-being

(H[orn,](#_bookmark89)

faction surveys and scores, institutionalizing a shift in HE relationships that increasingly frames students as “customers” and “clients” ([Harland, 2016](#_bookmark88)) within a purchaser–provider contract. Perverse outcomes of this development in teaching and learning includes grade inflation and a reluctance on the part of teachers to challenge or fail students ([Billsberry et al., 2023](#_bookmark31)).

Critics of these developments within HE character- ize them as symptoms of extreme neoliberalism (e.g., [De Vita & Case, 201](#_bookmark45)6; [Fleming, 2021;](#_bookmark57) [Fotaki & Prasad,](#_bookmark72) [2015](#_bookmark72); Tourish, 2019), which mechanistically and problematically promotes a new meritocracy ([Clarke](#_bookmark58) [& Knights, 2015](#_bookmark58)) and which some claim has fueled frustrations in academia worldwide ([Fleming, 2019](#_bookmark61)). This is not to say that meritocracy was not present in academia before neoliberalism; forms of meritocratic thinking that have led to unequal outcomes for indivi- duals and stigmatization of the unsuccessful as incompetent or incapable have long existed. Indivi- duals often internalize such judgments, resulting in diminished self-worth ([Sennett & Cobb, 1977](#_bookmark153)). How- ever, under neoliberal logic, such failure is framed and reinforced as a personal deficiency, further entrenching the belief that those who do not succeed simply lack the necessary skills or motivation, thereby reinforcing the idea that academic success is solely the result of personal merit.

According to [Fleming (2019)](#_bookmark61), neoliberalism in academia is conducive to three forms of alienation: self-alienation (individualism over collective self- governance), hijacked research (driven by metrics, measures, and rankings of journals), and classroom alienation (by turning the classroom into a theater of entertainment designed to please students as customers, rather than striving to *educate* in its foun- dational sense). It has been argued that hyper- individualism, counter-collective behavior ([Nkomo,](#_bookmark122) [2009](#_bookmark122)), and dishonesty ([Briggs et al., 2013](#_bookmark38)) have devel-

[2017;](#_bookmark89) Smith & Ulus, 2019) and burnout ([Z,abrodsk,a,](#_bookmark154) [Mudr,ak, S](#_bookmark154)-[olcova,, Kv-eton, Blatny, & Machovcova,,](#_bookmark154) [2018)](#_bookmark154); intensifying academic labor (e.g., [Adler & Harz-](#_bookmark35)

[ing, 2009;](#_bookmark35) [Mingers & Willmott, 2013)](#_bookmark102); and leading to increased levels of stress, depression, and self-doubt among academics who find themselves striving to meet institutional expectations ([Opstrup & Pihl-](#_bookmark134) [Thingvad, 2016](#_bookmark134)).

Paradoxically and alarmingly, it is academics that, we contend, are partly complicit in perpetuating a system which is causing such suffering and distress. By continuously having to respond to ceaseless rounds of research and teaching evaluations, at a time when tenure and permanent positions are becoming more competitive (B[ozzon, Murgia, Poggio & Rapetti,](#_bookmark36) [2017](#_bookmark36)), academics feel threatened by identity insecu- rity and are constantly having to prove themselves “worthy” (C[larke & Knights, 2015](#_bookmark58); [Knights & Clarke,](#_bookmark113) [2014)](#_bookmark113). The *fear* and *anxiety* of becoming peripheral ([Harding et al, 2010](#_bookmark82)) constantly push academics toward pragmatic responses to demonstrate their *excellence* in teaching, research, and academic citi- zenship; to make their “objective” excellence visible (D[avies & Petersen, 2005](#_bookmark77)) and thereby affirm their self-excellence within the system. Yet, paradoxically, this same fear and anxiety (C[hubb et al., 2020](#_bookmark46)), driven by the need to meet certain performance standards and survive the institutional pressures and expecta- tions for “academic excellence,” further reinforce the pursuit of self-excellence as a means of survival within the system and thus perpetuate conformity. Such conformity is evident in how academics, driven by fear and the need to establish a career (e.g., achiev- ing tenure for junior faculty) within the audit cultures of academia, navigate a fiercely competitive, dog-eat- dog environment ([De Vita & Case, 2016](#_bookmark45): 349). Often labeled as “winners and losers in a game of academic prestige” ([Adler & Harzing, 200](#_bookmark35)9: 74), academics are

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within a “logic of fantasy” ([Glynos, 2008](#_bookmark90): 276) of lim- itless potential ([Ekman, 2013](#_bookmark63)) with an underlying sense of unease and inadequacy. This pursuit, we argue, can lead to the disregard of ethical norms in academic work (C[larke et al. 2012](#_bookmark62)), compromising academics’ autonomy and agency by conforming to a system that dictates their reading choices, writing styles, publishing outlets, and citation practices (P[ar-](#_bookmark138) [ker & Thomas, 201](#_bookmark138)1).

Academics may initially conform to the system out of fear and anxiety, driven by the need to secure their position and attain stability within an increasingly competitive and precarious academic environment (B[ozzon et al., 2017](#_bookmark36)). However, we contend that, in the pursuit of excellence, once they achieve a “temporary” sense of security through compliance and cooperation ([Ball, 2012](#_bookmark25)), they identify with institutional requirements and get attached to them. Rather than detaching from the instrumental demands of the HE environment, they develop *career- ist desires* ([Clarke & Knights, 2015](#_bookmark58)). These desires motivate the pursuit of individual benefit within the system (e.g., promotion, prestige, etc.) and the enhancement of one’s “capital” in the political econ- omy of HE. This capital can be used to leverage academic negotiations (K[alfa, Wilkinson & Gollan,](#_bookmark103) [2018](#_bookmark103)), sometimes at the expense of engagement with community matters (B[othello & Roulet, 2019](#_bookmark32)). Such *desires*, moreover, are nurtured within young aca- demics who are trained to maximize career gains through publication ([Tourish, 2020](#_bookmark149)), these being the primary measure of “worth” (Butler & Spoelstra, 2020). Those academics, driven by a desire to reap personal rewards, have become entrepreneurial ([Bill-](#_bookmark31) [sberry et al., 2023](#_bookmark31)), adopting a gaming mentality (B[ia-](#_bookmark26) [gioli & Lippman, 2020](#_bookmark26)) to prioritize metrics over substance (Jo[nes et al., 2020](#_bookmark104)) in pursuit of promotion (L[orenz, 2012](#_bookmark85)). This illustrates how academics stabi- lize and reinforce the managerialist system through their pursuit of career advancement.

Nevertheless, despite its evident far-reaching impacts, we accept that neoliberalism has not had a totalizing effect on the academic landscape, and acknowledge that not everyone is a docile dupe of the system. This is evidenced by the presence of alterna- tive movements, voices, and resistance within acade- mia ([Bristow, Robinson & Ratle, 2017](#_bookmark40); [Robinson,](#_bookmark135) [Bristow & Ratle, 2023](#_bookmark135)). Such initiatives each repre- sent attempts to reclaim academic freedom and integ- rity. For instance, Utrecht University was the first HE institution to withdraw from the *Times Higher Educa- tion* ranking scheme, followed by some other Dutch

Maastricht, and VU Amsterdam). Similarly, [Bristow](#_bookmark40) [et al. (2017)](#_bookmark40) identify forms of resistance (diplomatic, combative, and idealistic) that critical management studies academics adopt to reconstitute what it means to be scholars in a business school context. It appears that both resistance and compliance can coexist, per- petuating power dynamics and relationships that may temporarily satisfy both faculty members and management, but ultimately lead to long-term organi- zational challenges ([Rintam€aki & Alvesson, 2023](#_bookmark121)). Academics often occupy dual positions—for exam- ple, embodying a mercenary mentality while also complying with management expectations regarding outputs ([Rintam€aki & Alvesson, 2023](#_bookmark121)). This duality speaks to an ambivalence in how academics navigate the neoliberal academic terrain and the fragility of resistance within the system.

Having identified problematic conditions in the

contemporary neoliberal HE environment—where academics simultaneously become attached to instru- mental institutional demands that cause distress and suffering, yet paradoxically play a role in perpetuat- ing them—we now turn to a consideration of theories that can assist in understanding and interpreting the dynamics of academic attachment. In the following section of the essay, we introduce two traditions (one Western, the other non-Western) that offer valuable and, we contend, mutually supportive perspectives on attachment—namely, [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) and Bud- dhist conceptions of attachment. Taken together, these conceptual frameworks cast light on the con- temporary academic predicament and help explain how and why academics conform with a neoliberal academic system that is conducive to high levels of distress and suffering.

THEORIZING FORMS OF ATTACHMENT WITHIN THE NEOLIBERALIST ACADEMIC SYSTEM

Individual attachment is an important characteris- tic that shapes the way people relate to others and the wider social and organizational context, providing insights into the dynamics of behaviors and relation- ships at work. In this section, we delve into concep- tions and forms of attachment, drawing on [Bowlby’s](#_bookmark33) [(1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment theory and the Buddhist perspec- tive to enhance understanding of academic work- place behaviors in the context of the challenges that neoliberalism poses. In particular, we attend to the forms of attachment that give rise to the paradox we identified in the first part of the paper; that is, attach-

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the “excellence” agenda which, in turn, can give rise to a desire for careerism.

We have chosen to incorporate the two seemingly different perspectives of attachment to guide our anal- ysis and arguments for several reasons. First, [Bowl-](#_bookmark33) [by’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment theory was chosen not as the definitive explanatory framework among the various psychological frameworks available, but for its funda- mental role in understanding emotional bonds and how these bonds shape behavior and decision- making. It is particularly valuable in exploring the attachments that academics form to systems and structures that may contribute to complicit adherence to neoliberal cultures of excellence. Second, while seemingly contradictory, Bowlby’s attachment theory and Buddhist teachings on nonattachment can com- plement each other in important ways. The apparent contradiction between attachment and nonattach- ment can stimulate a deeper understanding of human behavior by highlighting the complex ways in which individuals form attachments to systems and phe- nomena. Lastly, a combination of Bowlby’s theory and Buddhist philosophy provides an opportunity to bridge Western and non-Western perspectives—an integrative endeavor that is increasingly being called for ([Eisenberg, H€artel & Stahl, 2013](#_bookmark48); [Hardy & Tol-](#_bookmark91) [hurst, 2014](#_bookmark91); [Szkudlarek, Mcnett, Romani & Lane,](#_bookmark155) [2013](#_bookmark155); [Vu & Fan, 2024](#_bookmark165)). By engaging both perspectives, we hope to contribute to a more holistic understand- ing of attachment and its role in shaping human behavior, particularly in the context of academia, where both Western and Eastern approaches have much to offer.

Bowlby’s Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was originally developed by John [Bowlby (1969,](#_bookmark33) [197](#_bookmark34)3, [1980](#_bookmark37)) from a study of early childhood relationships. According to Bowlby’s attachment theory, there is a human propensity to seek and develop bonds with others based upon cognitive-affective processes of attachment that are rooted in parent–child relationships. These relation- ships reflect interpersonal attachment in a form that [Bowlby (1969)](#_bookmark33) calls an *attachment behavioral system*—an innate psychological system that moti- vates people to seek support from others in times of need. Differences in individuals’ attachment tenden- cies typically begin to develop during their early years, forming the basis on which relatively stable and dominant attachment styles can evolve in later adulthood ([Bowlby, 1973](#_bookmark34)), influencing cognitions,

behaviors throughout one’s life ([Richards & Schat,](#_bookmark123) [2011](#_bookmark123)). The theory is considered one of the most influ- ential human relationship theories in psychology ([Finkel & Simpson, 2015)](#_bookmark64).

[Hazan and Shaver (1990)](#_bookmark92) have extended Bowlby’s theory and applied it to the study of adult and work relationships. Like parent–child relationships ([Bowlby, 196](#_bookmark33)9), similar attachment dynamics can also be observed in organizational relationships involving leaders, coworkers, mentors, and the orga- nization itself as sources of social support ([Hazan &](#_bookmark92) [Shaver, 1990](#_bookmark92)). Attachment theory has been applied to understand the effects of attachment on organiza- tional socialization ([Nelson & Quick, 1991](#_bookmark124)), leader- ship practices and relationships ([Wu & Parker, 2017](#_bookmark148)), and ethical decision-making ([Chugh, Kern, Zhu &](#_bookmark49) [Lee, 2014](#_bookmark49)). Studies have found it useful to unpack how unfulfilled attachment needs of individuals in the work context can lead to negative consequences, such as increased stress, burnout, and increased turn- over ([Littman-Ovadia, Oren & Lavy, 2013](#_bookmark93)).

Different forms of attachment can affect individual functioning at work ([Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007](#_bookmark105)). For instance, individuals with *anxious attachment*—“the extent to which a person worries that others will not be available in times of need and anxiously seeks for their love and care” (S[haver Mikulincer & Cas-](#_bookmark144) [sidy, 2019](#_bookmark144): 16)—can develop and cling to a negative self-image. As a result, anxiously attached indivi- duals express anxiety about relationships at work and job performance ([Hardy & Barkham, 1994](#_bookmark94)) and have a greater *fear of rejection* based on poor perfor- mance at work ([Hazan & Shaver, 1990](#_bookmark92)). Anxiously attached individuals can also engage in attention- seeking behaviors, which can lead to counter- productiveness at work ([Yip, Ehrhardt, Black &](#_bookmark156) [Walker, 201](#_bookmark156)8).

Individuals with *avoidant attachment*—the extent to which a person distrusts others’ goodwill and defensively seeks to preserve behavioral and emo- tional independence ([Mikulincer & Shaver, 2020](#_bookmark106))— on the other hand, tend to downplay the importance of relationships ([Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005](#_bookmark107)). Avoi- dantly attached individuals tend to view others as unavailable, unresponsive, or punishing ([Bowlby,](#_bookmark34) [1973;](#_bookmark34) [Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005)](#_bookmark107), thus experiencing more conflict with coworkers and difficulties with relationships outside of work (H[ardy & Barkham,](#_bookmark94) [1994](#_bookmark94)). They can also disengage from work and people at work ([Richards & Schat, 2011](#_bookmark123)), or use work to avoid social interaction, aiming to minimize per- ceived feelings of rejection, loss, or vulnerability

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By contrast, those with *secure attachment*—the extent of one’s confidence in others’ responsiveness and supportiveness when needed—possess greater levels of optimism, and positive views of the self and others ([Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005](#_bookmark107)). Such individuals view themselves as worthy (low anxiety), see others as reliable (low avoidance) and are motivated to use effective coping mechanisms for solving challenges (Bowlby, 1977). Securely attached individuals tend to be “least likely to put off work, least likely to have dif- ficulty completing tasks, and least likely to fear failure and rejection from co-workers” ([Hazan & Shaver,](#_bookmark92) [1990](#_bookmark92): 275). They are less skeptical about others’ unfa- vorable evaluations of them and thus enjoy greater levels of psychological well-being (H[azan & Shaver,](#_bookmark92) [1990](#_bookmark92)).

Unlike [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) Western-based psychologi- cal and psychosocial view on attachment, which is primarily concerned with emotional bonds, Buddhist philosophy considers attachment from a non- Western perspective, seeing it as a fundamental cause of suffering. In the following section, we explore the Buddhist view in more depth and seek to integrate it with attachment theory to show how these seemingly contrasting understandings of attachment—rooted in different epistemological traditions—are, in fact, complementary. The resulting Bowlby–Buddhist ana- lytical lens reveals deeper insights into the ways aca- demics become entangled in the pursuit of success and recognition. It helps explain how craving success can produce anxious and avoidant attachment that contri- butes to the individual’s own dissatisfaction and the perpetuation of systemic pressures in academia.

The Buddhist Conception of Attachment1

When viewed as a psychological phenomenology and methodology rather than a “religion,” Buddhism

1 Buddhism is taught according to several different tra- ditions that evolved from the original oral teachings of the Buddha. We have elected to draw primarily on the Thera- vada tradition of Buddhism for two reasons: (1) it is the tra- dition that we are most familiar with both in terms of the intellectual philosophical basis and meditation practices;

(2) the teaching is set out comprehensively in the earliest known written form—that is, the *Pali Canon*. Accordingly, in this section and elsewhere we use P-ali terms when refer- ring to technical aspects of the *Dhamma* (Buddhist teach- ing). One of the authors is conversant with technical P-ali terminology. The recorded teaching of the other major tra- dition within Buddhism—Mahayana—uses Sanskrit. On occasion, and where it helps elucidation, we refer also to

presents a valuable perspective on the motivational dynamics of attachment. In the following discussion, we adopt Gyatzo’s (Gyatzo, cited in [Piburn, 199](#_bookmark141)0: 101)2 view of Buddhism as a “science of the mind.” The Buddha openly invited those interested in his teaching (*Dhamma*, P-ali; *Dharma,* Skt.) to “come and see for themselves” (*ehipassiko*), emphasizing the importance of personal inquiry and experiential understanding ([Stanley, 2012](#_bookmark157)) in verifying the truth (or otherwise) of the teachings. In other words, he dis- couraged students from relying on faith or belief when assessing the merits of the instruction they received. The approach encourages individuals to develop wisdom that is rooted in an *experiential* apprehension of the impermanent nature of all phe- nomena, thereby facilitating the loosening of attach- ment to everyday phenomena and alleviating human suffering ([Ng, Chow, Lau & Wang, 2017](#_bookmark125)).

The Four Noble Truths (*catta*-*ri ariyasacca*-*ni*) in the *Sacca-samyutta*3 lay the groundwork for understand- ing all aspects of human experience, including attach- ment. Attachment according to these teachings is rooted in an ignorance of—or failure to recognize— the fundamentally impermanent, unsatisfactory, and interdependent nature of reality. As [Gethin (1998](#_bookmark78): 137) observes: “If we become attached and try to hold on to things that will inevitably change and disap- pear, then we are bound to suffer.” In Buddhism, acknowledging impermanence—the constant state of change of all phenomena—is crucial for under- standing and overcoming entrapment caused by attachment to any aspect of experience, material or psychological. In other words, attachment in

2 Buddhist philosophy and practice are rooted in *sub- jective* experience and insight. They rely on *personal* phe- nomenological observation and enquiry. Based on ontology and epistemology that differs from the Western (social) scientific system, the results of enquiry cannot be externally verified. They appeal to truths, and apply truth criteria, whose validity is impossible to “prove” in a West- ern sense. However, we contend strongly that this does not detract from their value, as testimony from thousands of practitioners over the course of millennia demonstrate. The credibility of the Buddhist sources we cite are based in this ancient (and contemporary) *tradition*, in which per- sonal experience and insight are the sole arbiters of truth.

3 *Saṃyutta Nikaya* (the grouped discourses of the Bud- dha): The third of the five *nikayas* (collections) of the *Sutta Pit*: *aka*—the second of the three divisions of the *Pali Canon* (SN56). These truths explain that: (a) suffering exists; (b) it has a cause, which is craving and attachment arising from ignorance; (c) there is an end to suffering; (d) and there is a

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Buddhism is identified as an unhealthy fixation on any aspect of the body or mind (*na*-*ma-ru*-*pa*) as it can lead to resistance to change and distortions in percep- tions, memories and thinking ([Rahula, 1974](#_bookmark116)).

Toward a Bowlby–Buddhist Lens

We seek to integrate [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment theory with the Buddhist conception in order to explore how, in combination, they can deepen our understanding of various forms of attachment, their interrelationships, and the circumstances that may facilitate a transition from one form to another. In bringing the two perspectives together, we hope to reveal (a) their seemingly contrasting but complemen- tary interrelationships, (b) the underlying sources of *fear* that can foster *desires* associated with forms of attachment, and (c) the possibilities for acknowledg- ing and overcoming attachment.

Firstly, while [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment theory emphasizes secure attachment as a coping mecha- nism that can effectively tackle individuals’ anxiety and avoidant issues in order to promote well-being (H[azan & Shaver, 1990](#_bookmark92)), Buddhism offers a different conceptualization of what appears to be an everyday sense of security. According to Buddhist teaching, striving to attain “worldly security” can itself lead to suffering ([Cho€dro€n, 2003](#_bookmark50): 23–24). Buddhist psychol- ogy rejects the idea of a stable and permanent source of security, whether sought internally (e.g., through systems of belief, fixed views, sticking to routines, etc.) or externally (through the acquisition of mate- rial wealth, career success, the search for satisfying relationships, fame, etc.), as nothing can ever be completely stable, certain, or predictable (Sahdra & Shaver, 2013). For instance, people inevitably change, age, suffer ill health, and eventually pass away. Therefore, the need to find security and per- manent happiness through pleasure-seeking, rela- tionships, careers, material possessions, wealth, reputation, and fame entrap one in the “zones of safe- ty” and “illusions” that are all subject to imperma- nence and therefore cannot provide a source of lasting satisfaction ([Cho€dro€n, 2003](#_bookmark50): 23). In this sense, Buddhist nonattachment appears to challenge even the notion of “secure attachment.”

So, at first it might seem that attaining security

(based on [Bowlby’s [196](#_bookmark33)9] attachment theory) or gen- uine contentment (according to Buddhism) seem to be at cross-purposes: attachment theory valorizes “secure attachment,” while Buddhism is concerned to abandon *all forms of attachment* (Sahdra & Shaver,

Is [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment theory incommensu- rate with the Buddhist goal of overcoming attach- ment? We contend that the two conceptual stances are *not* contradictory but, conversely, complement one another. However, it is necessary to explore a technical aspect of Buddhist philosophy—namely, the existence of differing “registers” of truth—in order to justify and explain this claim.

According to both Mahayana and Theravada Bud-

dhism, reality (in phenomenal terms) can be appre- hended through both conventional4 and ultimate5 registers of truth6, also known as the “two truths” the- ory. When approached through conventional lenses, experience of the world is mediated by language and “known” through processes of signification and per- ceptual recognition. Buddhism understands the con- ventional world to be *socio-materially conditioned* and acknowledges the role that culture and conven- tion play in the linguistic and dualistic constitution of everyday life and experience ([Nyanatiloka, 1972](#_bookmark119): 206). [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) theory of attachment may be seen, from a Buddhist perspective, to be operating in this register; where the world is populated by individ- ual selves with identities, material objects, interper- sonal relationships, individual emotion and feeling, individual desire, aspiration, attachment, and so forth. At this conventional level, Bowlby’s concep- tion of attachments has powerful explanatory mean- ing. For example, “secure attachment” can be viewed as having positive value in terms of providing a rela- tively secure and stable basis for everyday relation- ships ([Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007](#_bookmark105)).

Indeed, Buddhist philosophy takes a similar view

regarding the importance of relationships in terms of cultivating *relative security and stability in the con- ventional world*. As [Batchelor (199](#_bookmark27)7: 114) notes, “[Buddhist practice] simply cannot occur without being rooted in a coherent and vital sense of commu- nity, for a matrix of friendships is the very soil in which [Buddhist] practice is cultivated.” Likewise, those who practice nonattachment claim that a highly

4 Sanskrit: *saṃvrtisatya*, Pali: *sammuti sacca*—experi- ence of a socially c\_ onstructed world of signification and

the signified ([Nyanatiloka, 197](#_bookmark119)2).

5 Sanskrit: *parama*-*rtha-satya*, P-ali: *paramattha sacca*— experience of a world characterized by three underpinning “marks of reality”: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suf- fering or unsatisfactoriness) and *anatta*- (non-self or inter- dependence) ([Nyanatiloka, 1972](#_bookmark119)).

6 In the Mahayana tradition this distinction has been characterized as N-ag-arjuna’s “two truths” doctrine

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developed individual feels great autonomy, confi- dence, and a deep concern and compassion for others (C[ho€dro€n, 2003](#_bookmark50)). In this sense, Western attachment psychology and Buddhism complement each other within the conventional register of truth by emphasiz- ing the importance of recognizing supportive social relationships ([Sahdra, Shaver & Brown, 2010](#_bookmark139)).

Secondly, moving beyond the conventional register of truth, the second register of truth in Buddhism refers to what phenomenologically lies beneath the taken-for-granted-ness of “conventional reality” ([Nyanatiloka, 1972](#_bookmark119): 124). This involves recognizing— through meditative enquiry—that phenomena are inherently empty and impermanent, making any form of attachment a constraint in realizing this “ultimate truth.” This register of truth can reveal how *fears* and *desires* naturally arise within conventional reality in ways that may be overlooked in everyday life. Specifically, we tend to hold the common-sense misconception that we operate with fixed identities surrounded by permanent objects. This perception provides conditions that can foster anxious attach- ment, rooted in the fear of losing one’s sense of self and its continuity, or as avoidant attachment, driven by the desire to maintain relational stability. Both unhealthy forms of attachment are grounded in a mis- taken conventional belief that acquiring possessions, status, or relationships will offer lasting security in the face of the inherently impermanent nature of all phenomena.

Lastly, within the so-called “ultimate” register of truth, the world is no longer taken at face value; rather, Buddhism encourages questioning of conven- tion and the search for underlying truths that may not be immediately apparent ([Nyanaponika, 1962](#_bookmark120)). This perspective offers possibilities for recognizing and transcending the desires, fears, and anxieties that drive attachment. At this ultimate level of apprehen- sion, it becomes clear that the conventional everyday world of experience is made up of a rapid sequential stream of fleeting and transitory sense-contacts (S[aya-](#_bookmark146) [daw, 1965](#_bookmark146)). Insight into this truth challenges even the basis of what [Bowlby (1969)](#_bookmark33) terms “secure attachment.” Buddhism makes clear, however, that understanding of the ultimate truths of imperma- nence, interdependency, and unsatisfactoriness does not obviate the existence of the conventional world of the “self” and its experience—as *conventionally* con- stituted ([N-anamoli, 1979](#_bookmark116)). Instead, one continues to navigate and experience everyday life according to one’s cultural and linguistic conditioning; it is simply that insight into ultimate truth *expands* one’s phe-

as “reality.” One’s conventional life continues side- by-side and in harmony with a “background” knowl- edge that there is a “deeper reality” that is the source, so to speak, of the surface phenomenal world (N[-anamoli, 1979](#_bookmark116)). In this sense, secure attachment at the conventional level can still form the basis of healthy relationships. There is no contradiction between [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment theory and Bud- dhism in this regard. However, a deeper exploration of attachment offered by Buddhist philosophy and practice enables individuals to recognize the causes of their entrapment in a cycle of suffering and, more- over, offers a pathway for liberation from this cycle (which we elaborate upon later in this essay when we introduce mindfulness practice).

The conclusion we arrive at from the argument set out in the passages above is that [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment psychology and Buddhist conceptions of attachment, although founded on different traditions, provide complementary insights. Both refer to the phenomenon of attachment, but the term is employed in attachment theory to address relationships under- stood in conventional terms. From the Buddhist per- spective, attachment needs to be addressed *both* in a conventional sense (recognizing the importance of secure everyday attachments) but *also in an ultimate sense* that all forms of grasping and attachment result in suffering. As we argue, this seeming paradox and incommensurability is resolved when attachment is viewed through the lens of the two Buddhist registers of truth.

In the following sections, we draw upon the inte- grated perspective we have developed—a Bowlby– Buddhist lens, if you will—to theorize the different forms of attachment underpinning academics’ fears and desires. This is intended to contribute to better understanding of the paradox we identified in the opening section of our essay; that is, how academics experience suffering and yet, simultaneously, are drawn to comply with the neoliberalist academic sys- tem that provides the supporting conditions for their dis-ease.

Academic Fear and Anxious Attachment to Excellence and Meritocracy

Motivated by the need to be more “mechanistic” (C[larke & Knights, 2015](#_bookmark58)) in the increasingly manageri- alist performativity-driven environment of business schools ([Spicer et al., 2021](#_bookmark152)), academics are inclined to put pressure on themselves to “perform better.” Such a culture has been characterized by the anxiety, disso-

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Smith, 2010) that affect all academics, from professors ([Butler & Spoelstra, 2012](#_bookmark51)) to early career academics (ECAs) ([Bristow et al., 2017](#_bookmark40), [201](#_bookmark43)9; [Ratle, Robinson,](#_bookmark117) [Bristow & Kerr, 2020](#_bookmark117); Robinson et al., 2017). For instance, under the pressures to publish, ECAs often find themselves feeling anxious and insecure about their academic identity ([Ratle et al., 2020](#_bookmark117)). We theo- rize that this prompts them to develop a sense of *anx- ious attachment*, driven by fear of insecurity—such as the concern of not securing or retaining an aca- demic position if they are not deemed “excellent.” In this sense, anxious attachment in the academic con- text can be conceptualized as a manifestation of a “fight” response (E[in-Dor & Hirschberger, 2016](#_bookmark52); [Ein-](#_bookmark52) [Dor, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2011](#_bookmark52)), expressed in forms of hyper-responsiveness ([Carson, Bartneck & Voges,](#_bookmark53) [2013](#_bookmark53)) to academic distress (depression, alienation, panic, etc.) ([Smith & Ulus, 2020](#_bookmark151)). Stress related to academic security, personal and professional devel- opment, and peer recognition is heightened as the individual strives to meet competitive demands ([Opstrup & Pihl-Thingvad, 2016](#_bookmark134)). Therefore, the pur- suit of excellence can serve to cultivate anxious attachment, wherein individuals attempt to address their concerns in an *extraverted* way by conforming and excelling in the eyes of others ([Davies & Petersen,](#_bookmark77) [2005](#_bookmark77)).

We contend that it is the fear of not having the capacity to meet the institutional expectations placed upon them, coupled with comparisons to “rock star” academics ([Smyth, 2017](#_bookmark158): 19), and the fear of losing status, resources, and power, that has generated hyper-individualistic pursuits of success ([Carson](#_bookmark53) [et al., 2013](#_bookmark53)). As Tourish (2019: 73) points out, “feelings of shame, dejection and guilt” become “constant companions” as the radical individualism of neoliberal academic culture takes hold and perme- ates academics’ lives. We concur with [Clarke and](#_bookmark58) [Knights (2015)](#_bookmark58) that *attachment to excellence* and striving to be visibly superior to others, however, can be self-defeating. From [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) perspective, this form of anxious attachment to be excellent is con- stantly manifested in a *fear of rejection* for poor per- formance at work ([Hazan & Shaver, 199](#_bookmark92)0) that makes it difficult for academics to attain a sense of secure attachment in the academic context—a confidence that fosters a proactive approach to academic work and resilience in the face of setbacks within the system.

The more academics are trying to reclaim and retain secure attachment, the more they foster an anxious attachment. In short, the search for content-

conditions results in ongoing distress and suffering, as academics unknowingly become complicit in the system. Autonomy is constrained by unstable institu- tional contexts beyond one’s control, such as the rela- tive and fluctuating availability of research funding, line management decisions regarding the balance between teaching and research allocations ([Dany,](#_bookmark75) [Louvel & Valette, 2011](#_bookmark75)), or the volatile nature of social and professional relationships, including academic collegiality (F[leming & Harley, 2023](#_bookmark59)). These risks lead academics to engage in “game-playing” strategies to navigate the inherent impermanence of the system. Coping strategies might include forming profitable quid pro quo partnerships, securing publications at any cost by incorporating superficial revisions to appease hostile reviewers, partnering with estab- lished professors as coauthors to increase the chances of acceptance, or engaging in transactional bargains with coauthors to maximize output with minimal effort (B[utler & Spoelstra, 2012](#_bookmark51)). Such game-playing and strategizing in the pursuit of academic excellence can indicate and reinforce anxious attachment, lead- ing to the dependency of academic identity on others (R[atle et al., 2020](#_bookmark117)).

Can such compromise and complicity in academia offer possibilities for security? We suggest that it can- not. From the Buddhist perspective on attachment, it is easy to become blind to the fact that attachment to “objective” instrumental achievements subjects one to circumstances and criteria of judgment that are, ultimately, beyond one’s control. In pursuit of excel- lence, moreover, academics may lose perspective on the limited impact of their work, given, for instance, the excessive amount of published research, much of which, as [Peters and Thomas (2020)](#_bookmark140) argue, lacks significant value and challenges the very notion of excellence they seek. As long as academics remain anxiously attached to others and measurable out- comes by unchallenged convention, they are destined to suffer.

Academic Desire as Avoidant Attachment to Careerism

Because of insecurity and anxious attachment to excellence, academics tend to develop a *desire* to pur- sue careerism, here defined as “the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person’s work experience over time” ([Arthur, Kha-](#_bookmark42) [pova & Wilderom, 2005](#_bookmark42): 179). This condition is likely to be particularly acute for those who find themselves in precarious positions (C[ourtois & Sautier, 2022](#_bookmark65))—

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hourly paid, or short-term contracts. Careerism imbues academics with a drive to secure the self both materially and symbolically, a strategy developed to respond to, and mitigate, the pressures of the institu- tionalization of managerialism in academia ([Clarke &](#_bookmark58) [Knights, 2015](#_bookmark58)).

However, careerism brings with it a set of chal- lenges. Within the process of careerism, academics are inclined to conform to the demands of perfor- mance culture, drawn by the allure of potential rewards, which leads them to adopt individualistic behaviors in order to fulfil formal organizational expectations (Roberts, 2005). These desires reflect academics’ compliance with the system, which is both a condition for, and a consequence of, careerism (Clark & Knights, 2015). For instance, those who seek career survival and success have little choice but to comply, and many ECAs have, arguably, now lost sight of any alternative to the instrumental status quo as a result ([Bristow, Robinson & Ratle, 201](#_bookmark43)9).

In their pursuit of a career, academics tend to try and avoid being labeled “troublemakers” (A[lvesson &](#_bookmark41) [Szkudlarek, 2021](#_bookmark41)), reflecting an *avoidant attachment* style that represents a “flight” or “freeze” response to academic stress (E[in-Dor & Hirschberger, 2016](#_bookmark54); [Ein-](#_bookmark52) [Dor et al., 2011](#_bookmark52)). This tendency leads academics to withdraw from or disengage in social interactions, typifying a *withdrawal* response that seeks to manage academic stress by avoiding confronting vulnerabil- ities, uncertainties, or personal fears. For instance, academics may disengage from community matters that could compromise their individual career pur- suits and outlooks ([Bothello & Roulet, 2019](#_bookmark32)). They may also avoid any expression of “open resistance” that could jeopardize career advancement ([Bristow](#_bookmark40) [et al., 2017;](#_bookmark40) [Ratle et al., 2020)](#_bookmark117) in order to avoid stress (O[pstrup & Pihl-Thingvad, 2016](#_bookmark134)). Such coping strate- gies enact a mode of complicity with the system that differs in expression from that of avoidant attachment (discussed in the previous section).

We contend that avoidant attachment both shapes and is shaped by the cumulative manipulation and alienation inherent in academic careerism ([Alakavuk-](#_bookmark39) [lar et al., 2017](#_bookmark39)). By sidestepping or ignoring problem- atic academic issues for the sake of avoiding stress and pursuing career advancement, individuals inad- vertently perpetuate extant systems of power and the status quo ([Courpasson & Marti, 2019](#_bookmark66)). For instance, researchers have observed instances where academics witness individuals seizing opportunities to outshine others ([Wu & Lebreton, 2011)](#_bookmark159), or where unhealthy practices like forced joint-authorship are

away as bystanders from taking action against unethi- cal academic malpractice, thereby reproducing and strengthening “the normal state of affairs” within the neoliberal culture of academia ([Zawadzki & Jensen,](#_bookmark160) [2020)](#_bookmark160).

There is an exploitative logic in play here, whereby many academics, driven by avoidant attachment, avoid confrontation and accept coercion and control (F[leming & Harley, 2023](#_bookmark59)). As a result, they can suc- cumb to burnout ([Z,abrodsk,a et al., 2018](#_bookmark154)), tolerating these feelings as a price worth paying for career advancement. [Dadkhah, Elias, Jazi, Christova-](#_bookmark73) [Bagdassarian, and Abu-Elteen (2015)](#_bookmark73) explain that aca- demics in higher administrative positions often add their names to publications without making meaning- ful contributions to the knowledge creation process. This situation arises because junior, career-ambitious colleagues driven by avoidant attachment tend to tol- erate the extraction of their ideas by senior academics, who then present this work as their own. While aca- demics with anxious attachment tend to develop a “fight” response, actively seeking recognition for their self-excellence, those with avoidant attachment adopt a “flight” response to avoid confrontation. Yet, we contend that both attachment styles contribute to and reinforce conformity within the academic system.

From a Buddhist perspective, enacting avoidant attachment to advance one’s career represents an attempt to find stability and permanence in a world characterized by impermanence. Academics trying to find “safety” and “comfort” through avoidant attach- ment tend to suffer, as they cling to temporary success that can never fully satisfy. A career that may seem secure and lasting can become uncertain and imper- manent due to external and unpredictable factors such as economic downturns or institutional restruc- turing. What is perceived as a “permanent” academic post, for example, can be threatened by redundancy, a phenomenon increasingly observed as the “new nor- mal” in business schools during the COVID-19 pan- demic ([Billsberry et al., 2023](#_bookmark31)). Therefore, avoidant attachment can impede development of academic relationships and prevent individuals from engaging in resistance that could otherwise facilitate progres- sive transformation within business schools.

We contend that fears and desires within academia that propel anxious or avoidant attachment feed and perpetuate an unhealthy instrumentality within the academic system. There is a need to develop an intel- lectual and experiential appreciation of the funda- mental *impermanence* of everyday phenomena— what Buddhism refers to as an *ultimate* truth—to

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thoughts, beliefs, and attachments ([N](#_bookmark117)~ [anananda, 2007](#_bookmark117); [Sahdra et al., 2010](#_bookmark139)). Exposing the nature of academic attachment opens possibilities for academics to acknowledge and potentially transcend the *fears* and unhelpful *desires* that can have such debilitating con- sequences for academic life. Below, we introduce a Buddhist mindfulness approach *as one means* by which academics might better recognize and under- stand the dynamics of attachment in HE contexts.

BUDDHIST MINDFULNESS: UNVEILING THE TWO TRUTHS UNDERLYING ATTACHMENT

In this section, we introduce a Buddhist approach to mindfulness that considers attachment to the “self” as a source of suffering and addresses the attachments linked to the pursuit of excellence and careerism within academia. Buddhist mindfulness practice

(P-ali: *sati*; Sanskrit: *smrti*) seeks to cultivate insight

*º*

into the ultimate truths of impermanence, unsatisfac-

toriness, and interdependence that, in turn, reduces ego-driven grasping and attachment ([Epstein, 1988](#_bookmark67); [Purser & Milillo, 2015](#_bookmark146)). This approach, we argue, is different from the more commonly known workplace mindfulness programs that often take a “for-gain” approach (M[agid & Poirier, 2016](#_bookmark95)), and is deliberately detached from the language and practice of its Bud- dhist origins to make it more accessible ([Kabat-Zinn,](#_bookmark108) [1990](#_bookmark108)). Workplace mindfulness programs often treat mindfulness as a tool to create a more productive “self,” thereby advocating the strengthening of one’s sense of self rather than reducing it and obviating the opportunity to provide practitioners with insight into deeper aspects and possibilities of mind.

Earlier in the paper, we introduced the two truths

theory of Buddhism, differentiating between conven- tional truth and ultimate truth. In what follows, we explore how the cultivation of Buddhist mindfulness affords the ability to investigate the relative veracity of these two truths in academic contexts.

Recognizing Anxious and Avoidant Attachment within the Register of Conventional Truth

Considered in terms of *conventional* truth, from a Buddhist perspective, we contend that secure attach- ment can serve as a foundation for individuals’ devel- opmental processes and is a “normal” aspect of human development. From a conventional stand- point, secure attachment refers to a sense of safety and stability needed to navigate life. In other words, it results from establishing a stable sense of ego, despite

are intrinsic to this development process ([Freud,](#_bookmark76) [1963;](#_bookmark76) [Levin, 1988](#_bookmark91)). However, early childhood experi- ences can shape one’s expectations and behaviors in later relationships, and current supporting conditions can either threaten or undermine those foundational secure attachments. Moreover, as [Bowlby (196](#_bookmark33)9, [1973](#_bookmark34)) points out, some individuals may have troubled or dysfunctional childhoods that prevent them from ever achieving a sense of secure attachment in the first place. In the contemporary HE context, as we argue above, academics are often confronted with a conventional reality that pressures them to pursue self-excellence and careerism, which, in turn, can challenge their sense of secure attachment or com- pound existing insecure attachments.

When a sense of secure attachment becomes too rigid—such as when it compromises the integrity of academic vocation and critical ethos in the pursuit of self-excellence ([Butler & Spoelstra, 2012](#_bookmark51)) or when individuals are unable to detach from the personal rewards tied to their careerism (Roberts, 2005)—they may fail to recognize their own suffering. They may not realize that their own pursuit of excellence and career success is dependent on conditions beyond their control. Increasing competition ([Dany et al.,](#_bookmark75) [2011](#_bookmark75)) and the fragile nature of academic relationships ([Fleming & Harley, 2023](#_bookmark59)) further challenge their indi- vidual agentic influence. These factors contribute to conditions under which unhealthy fears and desires manifest, leading to the development of anxious and avoidant attachments.

Academics experiencing insecurity or precarity in the workplace might be inclined to indulge and cling to habitual patterns of behavior because these offer a false sense of comfort and stability (T[rungpa, 2005](#_bookmark161)). Buddhist mindfulness practice can help academics direct their attention to the conditions they face in a more systematic way, cultivating awareness of the behavioral strategies they resort to. This practice can expose unhelpful habit patterns and reveal proximate social and cultural norms in the work environment that are motivating their conduct ([Brown, Marquis &](#_bookmark55) [Guiffrida, 2013](#_bookmark55)). Mindful observation, we argue, holds the promise of neutralizing the power of attach- ment to everyday phenomena and opens a space for alternative choices to be made.

For instance, academics succumbing to a publish- or-perish imperative often engage in rushed writing, prioritizing quantity over quality, and not doing themselves justice (e.g., focusing on incremental find- ings to meet deadlines rather than working in a con- sidered, thoughtful, and personally rewarding way).

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under pressure, it is crucial to recognize the persistent lack of fulfillment that arises from chasing metrics of success—a cycle that fosters ongoing stress and anxiety ([Clarke et al., 2012](#_bookmark62); [Smith & Ulus, 202](#_bookmark151)0). Reexamining conventional definitions of success and excellence mindfully can lead to greater awareness of their writing processes—whether in research, draft- ing, or revision—helping them recognize how exter- nal pressures, rather than intrinsic motivation, shape their scholarly output. This awareness is crucial for understanding the inherent dissatisfaction in pursu- ing external validation and seeing firsthand how fears and desires bind them to an institutional system that reinforces anxiety and constrains intellectual fulfillment.

The Relief of Anxious and Avoidant Attachment through Apprehending the Ultimate Register

of Truth

Buddhist mindfulness posits that for individuals to find relief from the suffering caused by attachment, phenomena should be viewed and deconstructed from the perspective of ultimate truth. Skill in mind- fulness practice reveals how conscious experience is constituted by a serial stream of sensory contacts— both physical (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste) and mental (e.g., recognition, perception, thought)—that occur with great rapidity to “make up” one’s everyday world. This direct seeing of phenomenological “ultimates” (the constituents of consciousness) grad- ually undermines belief in any form or permanence and the sense that any “thing” can exist indepen- dently, including—in the last analysis—the existence of a separate or independent self.

Viewing the world of experience directly through a register of “ultimate truth,” however, does not impact or change the conventional reality as it is subjectively and intersubjectively constructed. Rather, it results in a radical reorientation toward the world we perceive. It is a matter of how we interpret the phenomenal experience ([Schroeder, 2001](#_bookmark148)). An outcome of gaining insight into ultimate truths is the loosening of attach- ment and a deepening level of even-mindedness (*upekkha*-) toward experience. A level of understand- ing can be reached in which, according to the Bud- dha, “covetousness and dejection in the world” have been overcome ([Horner, 1987:](#_bookmark109) 71).

We argue that for academics, it would be possible in principle for them to recognize that workplace experiences (thoughts, ambitions, aspirations, emo- tions, relationships, desires, fears, joys, etc.) are fleet-

nature of experience with mindfulness *uncovers* attachments that arise and gradually *erodes attach- ment*. Over time, it becomes self-evident that no object of desire can yield lasting satisfaction in an ontologically impermanent and fleeting world; a real- ization that brings about a growing sense of liberation and “psychological freedom” (M[artin, 1997](#_bookmark110): 291).

With practice, anxious attachment to excellence and avoidant attachment to the pursuit of careerism can be observed through a lens of “bare attention,” without suppression or judgment. When academics have recognized their potential unhealthy anxious or avoidant attachments, they might still choose to meet institutional expectations with respect to their role, such as partaking in the “publication game,” or pur- suing grants and striving to be successful academics according to the criteria applied by their employers. There would, however, be reduced investment in the *results* of these choices, as attachment to excellence and careerism would be lessened once they recognize their striving to cling to things that are constantly changing ([Loy, 1985](#_bookmark96)).

For instance, the conditions on which attachment to excellence and careerism are based—such as publi- cations, recognition, and professional status—are subject to change due to shifting institutional stan- dards, priorities, and external pressures. Similarly, investment in instrumental collegiality and coauthor- ship can break down when a colleague who was once a key collaborator becomes less important if their expertise no longer aligns with current projects or institutional priorities. Mindful awareness allows academics to invest less emotionally in instrumental collegiality, coauthorship, or outcomes like rankings, citations, or prestige, and instead shift their focus to intrinsic academic values such as intellectual curios- ity, personal growth, and meaningful contributions.

We contend that for academics, it could be benefi- cial to realize that attachments are ephemeral con- structs of the mind within a *conventional* world characterized by impermanence ([Trungpa, 2015](#_bookmark164)). Mindfulness has the potential to enable academics to open themselves to a state of understanding that is beyond fear and desire. For instance, experiencing failure—such as rejected papers, failed experiments, or unsuccessful grant applications—can be part of a meaningful academic journey and a profound learning experience that pushes academics to refine ideas, improve methodologies, and develop resil- ience. While failure is a key element of the academic process, it is not an end point. Recognizing that all states—successes, failures, and academic endeavors

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embrace the dynamic and evolving nature of their work, encouraging them to persist and adapt in the face of challenges. If this mindset were developed, possibilities and choices would no longer be confined by rigid institutional definitions of success or security but would, instead, be shaped by a deeper awareness of impermanence and a new-found flexibility rooted in even-mindedness.

Consequences and Implications of Developing Mindfulness and Even-Mindedness in the Academic Context

Even-mindedness should not be taken to imply docility or political quietism. “Acceptance” of, and even-mindedness toward, one’s professional cir- cumstances does not preclude making choices to be individually or collectively assertive in seeking to change working conditions. Instead, it affords practi- tioners greater power to perceive injustices in the workplace, whether related to their own or others’ circumstances, and to speak out mindfully about injustice when deemed appropriate. For instance, academics can frame their concerns in ways that foster reflection and dialogue during departmental meetings, advocating for a more inclusive and equi- table work environment without escalating conflict. This approach allows them to position themselves as active participants in shaping departmental policies by presenting relevant data, sharing successful case studies from other institutions, and proposing con- crete steps for policy improvements. In this way, aca- demics avoid relegating themselves to the role of passive bystander merely to preserve their own secu- rity within the system. Instead, they would exercise their professional autonomy to challenge unreason- able or unwanted demands and may collaborate with others in counter-spacing activities ([Jones et al.,](#_bookmark104) [2020](#_bookmark104)) to enact change. Anxiety and fear would be supplanted by a mindful response, within which academics can make choices about the activities they engage in with respect to their academic duties and responsibilities.

Within academic institutions, the adoption of Bud- dhist mindfulness principles and practice in the con- text of professional academic life will not, of itself, change the prevailing conditions under which staff work. Nonetheless, it is our hope to contribute to and support alternative mindfulness approaches that con- test the would-be totalizing ambitions of neoliberal- ism ([Cook, 2016](#_bookmark68)). Our approach is consonant with [Ng’s (2016)](#_bookmark126) claim that ethical self-cultivation and

surmount or abandon the limits of neoliberal govern- mentality. For instance, mindful academics might advocate for the reassessment of institutional values, and promote more collaborative, reflective, and purpose-driven academic pursuits, thereby challeng- ing the competitive and hierarchical structures imposed by neoliberal governmentality.

Some mindfulness-informed movements have been observed in “slow scholarship” ([Leibowitz &](#_bookmark82) [Bozalek, 2018](#_bookmark82)), “counter-spacing” (Jo[nes et al., 2020](#_bookmark104)), and “collective activism” ([Belkhir et al., 2019](#_bookmark28); [Bris-](#_bookmark40) [tow et al., 2017](#_bookmark40); [Ratle et al., 2020](#_bookmark117); [Robinson et al.,](#_bookmark135) [2023](#_bookmark135)). Our advocacy of Buddhist mindfulness contri- butes to these counter-cultural developments by emphasizing the importance of cultivating even- mindedness toward the neoliberal academic cultures one encounters. For instance, it is important for busi- ness schools to acknowledge that ethical responses to systemic injustice (e.g., diversity and inclusion poli- cies used merely as checklist items to boost rankings and public image) should not be formulaic or driven solely by conventional performative gestures. We also argue that detachment from difficult emotions and choices should not be avoided but rather actively engaged with. Reflecting on the painful realities and failures within business schools, for example, is one way to recognize and bypass the conventional states of fear and desire. This approach goes beyond performative gestures and fosters awareness of how complicity and tolerance are woven into everyday interactions and institutional practices, thereby addressing the root causes of systemic failures and promoting meaningful, sustainable change. The capa- bility to differentiate between the two truths enables academics to neutralize the power of attachment to worldly phenomena and avoid perpetuating and reproducing unquestioning compliance and complic- ity within systems.

By offering a Buddhist mindfulness approach as *one* means within a repertoire of responses to the neo- liberal academic predicament, it is not our intention to be dogmatic or view it as a panacea. We recognize that mindfulness has become an extremely fashion- able topic of late and that its purported benefits might have been overrepresented in the literature at the expense of underrepresented drawbacks ([Reb, Allen](#_bookmark127) [& Vogus, 2020](#_bookmark127)). We are aware that Buddhist mindful- ness, taken as a personal practice with specific func- tions (V[u & Gill, 2018](#_bookmark166)), requires self-regulation that differs based on individuals’ differences and capaci- ties. Transforming and advocating this practice in a manner that facilitates widespread *collective*

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desirable expectation. Likewise, overreliance on *indi- vidual* mindfulness practice can entrap practitioners into an adaptive strategy that encourages them to adjust and adapt themselves to the dynamism of neoliberalism. Unwise individual docility risks undermining justice and awareness of collective suffering—ironically (given that mindfulness is pre- mised on developing greater “awareness”), there is a danger that it could blind us to structural and political realities within academia ([Walsh, 2018](#_bookmark167)).

If promoted on a large scale in academia without a conducive work environment ([Reina & Kudesia,](#_bookmark128) [2020](#_bookmark128)) that carefully caters for situational conditions in which mindfulness is introduced ([Reb et al., 2020](#_bookmark127)), it could easily take on cultic or elitist characteristics (K[ucinskas, 2018](#_bookmark90))—prompting the formation of in- and out-groups. Indeed, some critics have accused mindfulness of being a “pop capitalist spirituality” replete with a “self-help doctrine” that transfers the risk and responsibility for well-being onto the indi- vidual ([Purser, 2018](#_bookmark145)). At its worst, the danger is that mindfulness becomes little more than a self-care prac- tice that serves the productive needs of corporate cap- italism and neoliberalism. Without an understanding and application of Buddhist-ethics-based principles (P[urser & Milillo, 2015](#_bookmark146)) and having a mind to condi- tions of safety and well-being ([Walsh, 2018](#_bookmark167)), mindful- ness practice could result in adverse effects and reinforce, rather than undermine, delusion ([Purser,](#_bookmark145) [2018](#_bookmark145)). Improperly practiced (typically in the absence of qualified and expert guidance), mindfulness risks becoming a disciplinary and regulatory practice that could reinforce (rather than reduce) potential anxious and avoidant attachment. For instance, placing exces- sive and neurotic demands on oneself to monitor or regulate internal states and behavioral responses could readily become counterproductive and self- defeating. It is only when mindfulness is introduced with an appreciation of its ethical and philosophical basis that it holds the prospect of benefiting not only the individual practitioner but also the academic community and the institutions that employ them.

CONCLUSIONS

By revealing the different forms of attachment that many academics unconsciously suffer from, our intended contribution in this paper is threefold. First, we seek to reconcile [Bowlby’s (1969)](#_bookmark33) attachment the- ory and Buddhist conceptions of attachment and develop an integrated lens to explore the dynamics of attachment within everyday HE contexts. In so doing,

learning and education readership that hail from dif- fering traditions based on contrasting ontological and epistemology foundations (one Western in origin, the other non-Western). Second, applying the Bowlby– Buddhist lens, we conceptualize an underlying con- dition that continues to perpetuate the neoliberalist academic system; namely, the entrapment of aca- demics shaped by forms of anxious and avoidant attachments that are readily ignored or overlooked. Identification of these attachments contributes to the ongoing conversations on the need to be more aware of, and take responsibility for, one’s own agency in academia ([Fleming & Harley, 2023](#_bookmark59); Tourish, 2019). It is not just neoliberal business schools that hold the power to maintain performance measurement sys- tems within audit cultures ([Power, 2021](#_bookmark143); [Rintam€aki &](#_bookmark121) [Alvesson, 2023](#_bookmark121)), but it is also us, academics, who are complicit in nourishing the quantification of aca- demic achievements and successes ([Fleming & Har-](#_bookmark59) [ley, 2023](#_bookmark59)). The neoliberal malaise manifests in the felt need to promote and protect self-excellence and careerism—motives that, as we argue, can elicit anx- ious and avoidant attachments in response to one’s workplace demands and expectations. These attach- ments entrap academics in a state that can prevent them from being able subjectively and reflexively to judge their careers on the basis of what is important to them and exercise agency accordingly ([Arthur et al.,](#_bookmark42) [2005)](#_bookmark42). Instead, their own judgment is all too often hijacked by instrumental measures of “achievement” ([Sandhu, Perera & Sardeshmukh, 2019](#_bookmark142)). Yet, a mean- ingful academic life is more than the metrics of a high *h*-index, publication rankings, teaching evaluations, or grant successes ([Elangovan & Hoffman, 2021](#_bookmark69)). The development of mindfulness skills and insights can lead to greater levels of even-mindedness and hold the prospect of approaching life—including academic working life—in a more balanced manner. From this vantage point, failure is acknowledged as a natural and essential component of the academic journey and a fundamental aspect of the learning process.

Lastly, by introducing Buddhist mindfulness phi- losophy and practice, we hope to offer alternative methods and choices for academics to gain a fresh perspective on the *conventional* aspects of academic life and open themselves to the possibilities of explor- ing the *ultimate* register of truth. Seeing directly for oneself the impermanent nature of phenomena and apprehending the inherently unsatisfactory essence of all worldly entanglements, promises to reduce and, eventually, release one from the thralls of grasping and attachment. Being fully present and equanimous

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which to make choices with respect to their engage- ment with the neoliberalist system, be that knowingly “going along” with the status quo—accepting the rules of the game—or taking active steps to change working conditions in the shorter- or longer-term through acts of individual or collective resistance and activism.

In the scope of this paper, we have only been able to introduce mindfulness practices to a limited extent and from a particular tradition. We invite further studies to explore alternative methods of mindfulness from various Buddhist schools (e.g., exoteric and esoteric orientations in Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Bud- dhism, etc.) and from diverse non-Buddhist traditions (e.g., Daoist meditation, Christian *Meditatio*, Hindu *Dhya*-*na*, etc.; for a review of traditions, see Farias et al., 2021) that potentially might assist academics reclaim their agency, passion, and sense of scholarly vocation. This is an area of research in the field of mindfulness studies that is ripe for further exploration. Such studies could, furthermore, investigate the actual, desired, or potential outcomes for practitioners of Buddhist mind- fulness in terms of alternative modes of scholarship and academic practices that do not entail serving a neoliberal institution. We believe that, as academics, it is imperative to remind ourselves that most enter aca- demia with the noblest of intentions—an uncondi- tional love for research, teaching, knowledge, and ideas (Bristow, 2012). If we have betrayed that love through our own self-centered desires and attach- ments, it behooves us find the courage to recognize our weaknesses and reignite our academic passion.

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