Feminist Collaborations in Higher Education: Stretched across Career Stages (0509)

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Introduction: Feminist Academic Stretches

As universities 'push us to work harder, sell ourselves better and engage in competition rather than collaboration' (Gill and Donaghue 2016: 93), and as 'early career' and 'established' career categories are problematized, collaboration *across career stages* becomes an important empirical case for understanding how feminist academics work to take up space higher education. In this paper we present a collaborative auto-biographic conversation between the authors, exploring our cross-career collaboration in order to read categorical career stages and feminist collaborations through each other. We argue for more pluralised and fragmented understandings of 'career stages', beyond *either* precarity *or* privilege, and make the case for a messier imaginary of feminist academic work and careers.

Making space for feminists and feminisms involves performing instrumentally within the dominant terms of neoliberal, entrepreneurial, marketized higher education at the same time as working to resist and rework these structures (Skeggs 1995, Pereira 2017). When competitive individualism is 'built-into' academic performance management (Acker and Wagner 2017: 8), collaboration is often positioned as feminist praxis. Horizontal ways of working are understood as 'essential for well-being at work' in the face of competitive individualism (Gannon et al 2015: 189-191). Support networks are seen as necessary to buffer entrenched 'old boys networks' (Bagilhole and White 2013) and support 'alternative career strategies' (Angervall 2016), and mentoring

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relationships are positioned as vital to career progression (Redmond et al 2017: 335-336; Bagilhole and White 2013, Equality Challenge Unit 2017). However, 'there is this fantasy around feminist research that we can all work collaboratively, but people still have careers' (Acker and Wagner 2017: 11). Collaboration can reinscribe normative assumptions about women as innately nurturing, informing disproportionate responsibility for doing gender diversity work, with women 'sacrificing [their own] career gains' to support others (Pearce 2017: 15).

Methods

This research paper analyses our experiences working together across different career locations; an established feminist professor (a white woman from a working-class background) and an early career academic (a white woman from a middle-class background). Since Gill observed that 'the experiences of academics have somehow largely escaped critical attention' (2010: 229) an emergent body of work has developed auto-biographical and auto-ethnographic methods for studying academics and academic work (Quinn et al 2014; Spirit et al 2017). These methods are contextualised by much longer histories of feminist methods grounded in experiential ways of knowing (Harding, 1997; Hartstock, 1997; Smith, 1997, Hill Collins 1990; Mirza 1997; Holloway 1997; Morley 1997; Reay 1997).

We follow precedents for auto/biography as 'signalling the active inquiring presence of sociologists in constructing, rather than discovering, knowledge' (Stanley 1993: 41). *Collective* biographical methods are appropriate to our aims, allowing for 'collaging individual stories to undermine the notion of narratives as individual' (Spirit et al 2017: 2). We present a conversation crafted using (long, multiple) email exchanges from 2015 onwards, diaries, calendars and notes, job descriptions, and online academic 'corridor talk' as fragments and prompts. We met face-to-face to discuss the everyday

details and discursive construction of our collaborations. Through these discussions our focus narrowed to a single meeting, in a café one evening in December 2016.

Stretched Across Career Stages[1]

At the cafe I scribble furiously, pages and pages, trying to write down everything she says. The brief for the interview presentation instructs that I should present on my research *achievements, plans, and vision*. I tell The Feminist Professor this, and she replies straight away that achievements means *publications*, plans means *funding*, and vision means how my research aligned with the university's – and department's – *strategy and themes*. I scrawled this out in my notebook, in capital letters, taking up a whole page.

All the information is held in my head, what to say, how to present, how to nuance and adapt, to fit the collective, while also being independent, unique – do bring something new! I speak fast and pages of notes are written as we sit during our holidays, revisiting the application and rehearsing issues and likely interview questions. I wonder if I am frightening the applicant, I think sometimes academia is a bit frightening. When the work is done, or just begun, in being successful and appointed, a colleague advises 'watch your workload', 'learn to say no'. The colleague, like us all, has other motivations and agendas, and I reel in the advice while 'working my load'.

Walking home I think about this work. The funding bids and publications we have worked on over the past year take place outside the scope of my then 0.7 FTE post. I am certain that supporting me like this – informally, at Christmas – is not recognized as part of The Feminist Professor's workload. When 'future leader' and 'starting grant' and

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1   extract from longer data presentation in full paper

'early career fellowship' schemes ask me to *identify a mentor at the host institution* this role, this work, is not costed into the grant. *Achievements-plans-visions*, I write these headings out again and again over the next fortnight, at the top of blank pages in notebooks, headings on slides, preparing for the interview. *Achievements-plans-visions* these categories ask me to be accomplished, aspiring, future-orientated.

Conclusion

It is clear that despite the pleasurable and critical possibilities of feminist collaborations, such ways of working are neither inherently nor automatically resistant to the hyper-competitive individualism that structures our workplaces. Thinking through collaboration as problem-and-solution means attending to how 'women's relational labour is co-opted by educational institutions' (Gannon et al 2015: 189, 194). Here we pause to consider how the feminist project of supporting 'younger' academics can ambivalently do the work of remediating a lack of institutional care and accountability.

Our conversation shows that in practice, feminist stretches across career categories entail a much messier experience of 'career stages', than the linear, upwardly mobile and meritocratic progress articulated in diagrammatic representations of 'the' career stage. As fixed categories, career stages work to position academics as *either* precarious *or* privileged, but our conversation reveals elements of insecurity side-by-side with the security of arrival. This observation allows us to stretch the meaning of career categories themselves, and this paper offers one contribution to a more pluralised and fragmented imaginary of feminist academic work and careers.

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