

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Disposable academics? Intersections of gender, precarity and care in academic life

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Abstract:

In the light of increasing casualisation of academic work across the UK higher education sector, this paper interrogates the affective, professional and equity implications of this model, particularly in relation to women, and asks how we might envisage more sustainable ways of working. It draws on an institutional survey, focus groups and interviews with eighteen early career women academics on non-permanent contracts. With a focus on gender, it considers ways in which academic precarities intersect with other identity characteristics to create multiple layers of marginalisation. [Yet it is not only individuals and their careers who are adversely affected; there are potentially negative consequences for academic outputs, alongside the costs of poor staff retention and stress-related absence.](#) In the long-term many colleagues, apart from the most privileged, are likely to be dissuaded from pursuing academic careers, thereby undermining equity goals. This paper aims to open up discussions about how current normalizations of widespread precarity can be resisted.

Paper:

Broad concerns about changing patterns and conditions of work within a neoliberal climate have accelerated in recent decades (Sennett, 1998; Standing, 2011), UK universities adopting US inspired business models, involving continual restructuring and creating precarity within the academic workforce. While this has invited critiques it continues apace with over half the academic workforce in the UK now on non-permanent contracts (Universities and Colleges Union, 2016). In the US, these models have become embedded with devastating impacts on the lives and work of non-tenured academics who often face years of uncertainty over their futures. Concerns have been raised in in this

context in relation to the impact on women who experience barriers developing careers in academia, especially in relation to the difficulty in planning and managing family life (Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015). In the UK, it has been found that women in SET are being dissuaded from pursuing academic careers at all, partly due to an inability to plan for the future (Lober Newson, 2012). This paper argues that the implications of this hostile academic environment for long-term gender equality goals requires urgent attention; complacency and normalization of such working conditions must be resisted. With a focus on intersections of precarity, gender and care, it outlines the personal, affective, health, financial and career consequences for women academics and the sector.

There is a well-established literature surrounding the uneven gendered playing field in academia with ongoing structural and cultural barriers to women's progression in academia; Reay and Ball (2000) contend that it is historically a culture where women 'count for less'. While a range of institutional initiatives have sought to encourage women academics through skills development, research has demonstrated that they are still judged in accordance with gendered expectations (Leathwood, 2017). Savigny (2014) has attested to a masculinised 'macho' culture within academic departments, including assumptions that women will take care of the 'private sphere' of life while [Reay \(2004\) has](#) discussed 'academic housework' in relation to the tendency for pastoral care, teaching and lower-level administrative tasks to fall disproportionately to women. However, the majority of studies in this field tend to focus on women who are already established in academic careers, research focussing on leadership and women in the upper echelons of academia (Thwaites and Pressland, 2017). A further emergent body of work has raised concerns about current academic working conditions against a backdrop of marketisation. Afonso (2013) has critiqued a divide between 'insiders' in secure, stable employment and 'outsiders' in fixed-term, precarious employment while Morphew, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2018) find disproportionate workloads allocated to contingent colleagues. Such precarities create new forms of domination and injustices in interaction with gender, class and other identity-based inequities in the academy (Hey, 2001; Reay, 2004).

This research has sought to identify ways in which precarity intersects with gender, care and other positionings. Within a case study methodology, it employed mixed methods including a free-text survey of over 60 individuals, focus groups across the disciplinary areas of social sciences, arts and humanities and life sciences and 12 narrative interviews. It found that impacts of precarity, coupled with a highly pressurized neoliberal academic environment (Gill, 2010) created catastrophic health, personal and career ramifications. Participants often worked in multiple fractional contracts across different institutions, balancing the competing demands of these with caring, family and relationship responsibilities. Participants found themselves unable to fulfill the requirements of being an 'ideal academic' (Bourdieu, 1988) who is able to unquestioningly place academic work above all else.

Conditions were frequently exploitative with constant requirements to go 'above and beyond', undertaking additional work in their 'spare time' under the threat of termination of contracts. Exploitative relationships came into play with people's work being uncredited and gendered dimensions to this were apparent; one participant stated that, *'it feels like a boys' club, men selling my ideas as their own.'* Participants reported micro-aggressions (Morley, 1999) from powerful male colleagues in particular, in terms of treatment in meetings, exclusions from funding bids and publications, receiving less formal recognition and accolades, being passed over for promotional opportunities, lack of understanding about caring responsibilities and cases of overt bullying and intimidation. Combined with this were stresses of ongoing uncertainty and an inability to plan forward; constantly needing to find work to survive ironically meant lack of time to undertake developmental activities and so a sense of loss of control and autonomy featured. Invisibility was a key theme with participants feeling a lack of understanding, sympathy and support for their predicament from permanently employed colleagues and their institution, especially those trapped in long-term precarity, one participant sharing that, *'I watch those with permanent lecturing posts being able to set priorities for their work whilst I feel like I am in the longest job interview in history and it is a condition of ongoing precarity which is invisible to those I work with.'*

Findings highlight ways in which precarity intersects with gender, care and other marginalisations in the academy with greater value being placed on certain bodies, knowledges and contributions and participants felt this insider / outsider divide keenly: *'My insecurity of contract impacts upon my self-esteem and how I interpret the value placed upon my work by the university. It often makes me feel demoralised and not valued.'* Yet there was normalization and acceptance of such experiences even within these accounts, putting issues down to choice and personal circumstances, repeating narratives of period of post-doc 'apprenticeship' being the norm and there simply not being enough academic jobs. Whilst these are factors which come into play, such narratives can obscure structural inequities and the deliberate adoption of business models which comprise lack of investment in staff, exacerbating exploitative situations and exclusionary practices across the sector with disastrous effects for individuals and institutions. The long-term implication of pursuing this path is that only the most privileged in society will be able to undertake the risks of pursuing academic careers and so narratives of normalization must be resisted.

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