

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Interruptions in Higher Education: Queer Feminist Career Cares

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**Research Domain:** Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

**Abstract:** We discuss our recent book *Feminist Repetitions in Higher Education: Interrupting Career Categories* and focus on queer feminist practices of care across academic career courses and categories. Caring in academia is readily positioned as antithetical to careering *and* as a feminist strategy for career-building in HE. While commitments to collegiality and collaboration can be held up as feminist principles, such work is readily incorporated as the university relies upon feminised caring labours, albeit devalued in hiring and promotions. Using our innovative interruption methods, we explore: 1) Who is expected to care for others across the career course, when embracing care-full feminist practice invites repetitive over-work, 2) The (mis)recognition of queer feminist cares in dominant care frameworks, and 3) How in failing care queerly feminists can (not) care across the career course in ways that interrupt recapture by the institution and the gendered disparities of care in the university.

**Paper:**

This paper is about queer feminist practices of *care* across academic career courses. Despite the neutral language of *caring responsibilities*, care continues to be imagined in hetero-reproductive terms, just as care work is naturalised as essentially feminine, ‘women’s work’ done for love rather than money. Much literature focuses on academics with caring responsibilities beyond to the university (Henderson & Moreau 2020), and childcare has been subject to heightened attention during Covid-19 (Whiley et al. 2020). However, academic work itself involves a variety of caring labours (Burford et al. 2020), and we are concerned with how queer feminists negotiate the work of care as entwined with the career course. Here we set out some background to our research, and introduce our interruption methods, contextualising our conference presentation.

Feminist understandings of care in HE are characterized by ambivalence. The university has been theorized as a care-less institution, where the ideal academic subject is construed as ‘unencumbered by caring responsibilities’ (Lynch 2010, 57). This ‘ideal’ is grounded in heteronormative masculinity and imagined as ‘a perennial bachelor or a male academic with a wife who tends to the home’ (Henderson & Moreau 2020, 72). The careless university and care-free academics alike depend upon devalued caring labour, and academic success can involve ‘free-rid[ing] on other people’s care work, both within and without the academy’ (Lynch 2010, 60). Care has never been external to academic

work, but rather constitutes the 'infrastructure serving the [supposedly] great [implicitly] male mind' (Rudberg 1996, 292). Even when the university explicitly rewards carelessness, this can depend on the continued extraction of care and care-full ways of working.

Academics with caring responsibilities, *and* those made disproportionately responsible for 'plugging the institutional-care gaps' (Gannon et al. 2015, 195) can encounter discriminatory barriers to career progression: 'there is an inverse relationship between who cares and who advances' (Cardozo 2017, 408). In this context, feminist appeals to caring for each other orientate towards building more collaborative and supportive workplaces *and* as a necessary, rather instrumental, career strategy. Practicing care-full feminist collectively is positioned as disrupting hyper-competitive individualism, as in calls for 'radical kindness' (Burton & Turbine 2018, 2019), for 'a new collective imaginary of academia' (Gannon et al. 2015, 191) and more broadly for 'universal care' (The Care Collective 2020). We are told 'that women should support other women in the academy both formally and informally' (Morley 2013, 124) in part to bolster individual career progression since 'without collaboration and support, chances are slim that one is able to reach the top of the academic hierarchy' (Heijstra & Pétursdóttir 2021, 12).

Working in this context we deployed collaborative autoethnographic research, including developing feminist *interruptions* as method, adapting techniques from collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006) and sociological fiction (Watson, 2016) to explore how queer feminists negotiate caring across the career course. We stretch such techniques in conversation with feminist sociologists' critical readings of reflexivity (Adkins, 2002). Over a two-year period we worked with artifacts and prompts, to write collaboratively based on our individual and shared experiences, developing structuring themes as we exchanged drafts and cross-cutting each other's initially individual stories, writing back, replying, and responding.

Over time, this collaborative re-working cohered around our technique of interrupting and fragmenting our accounts as we wrote them. We developed our initial materials into fictionalised data fragments, by way of fabrication as ethical practice (Markham 2012). In practice this meant developing multiple voices with which to speak back to our accounts, writing ourselves from different career locations, imagining ourselves into (remembered past, and anticipated future) positions, as well as writing fictionalised encounters with composite figures of the academic career course. This allowed us to develop partial, fragmented, interrupted career narratives, 'entangled data-stories' (Brooks et al. 2017, 3), unsettling linear accounts of career progression.

Our interruption methods allow us to re-think queer feminist approaches to care, exploring: 1) *Who* is recognised for their caring labours, and who is expected to care for others across the career course, when care-full collaboration as feminist praxis requires more (over)work. 2) The (mis)recognition of queer feminist cares in dominant care frameworks, including how these can potentially interrupt normative (re)productive cares. 3) Asking how and whether in failing care queerly, feminists can care (and not care) across the career course in ways that resist recapture by greedy institutions (Hey 2004) hungry for under- and unpaid feminist, as well as feminised, labour. In doing so we revitalise long-standing feminist debates about caring and careering, asking how to make the vital labour of care 'visible, valued, and equitably distributed' (Weeks 2011, 13) while simultaneously refusing its exploitation and recapture.

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