

## **The Personal is Theoretical: how do theoretical research practices affect the lives of early career researchers outside of formal research contexts?**

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### **Abstract**

The poster presents the design and initial findings from my Irish Research Council postdoctoral project which explores how humanities theoretical research practices affect the lives of early career researchers (ECRs) outside of research contexts. Within neoliberal universities, it is challenging to defend the merits of such practices that appear to bring few tangible outcomes. My project seeks to address this by exploring the hypothesis that these practices bring personal benefits to ECRs, such as supporting their self-understanding.

Through a diary-interview method, I will co-construct narrative accounts with 5-6 ECRs. Participants will be required to self-reflect on moments when they recall theoretical concepts in contexts beyond research settings. Analysis of the accounts will draw on the growing conceptualisation of research education as a process involving and transforming the whole person, as well as on feminist arguments that theory needs to be grounded in the personal to be liberatory (hooks, 1994).

### **Full paper**

The poster will present my Irish Research Council-funded postdoctoral project, outlining the design and initial findings from the data generation due to start in autumn 2024.

How do theoretical research practices affect the lives of early career researchers (ECRs) outside of formal research contexts? The project defines 'theoretical research practices' as those that aim to explore concepts which shed light on the complexity of the world but which are not intended to be immediately considered in 'real-life' contexts. The project focuses on these practices as they are conducted by researchers aligned with humanities fields such as media and cultural studies, and philosophy. Within neoliberal universities, it is challenging to defend the merits of such practices which appear to bring few tangible outcomes. My project aims to contribute to efforts to address this by building evidence of some of the less visible outcomes. It will explore the hypothesis that theoretical research practices bring personal benefits to the lives of the ECRs who employ them, such as supporting their self-understanding.

Data generation for the project will be based on narrative accounts co-constructed with 5-6 ECR participants. A diary-interview method over 4 months will encourage participants to develop their own self-reflections on the relation of their research to their outside lives. It will involve three stages: initial interviews, a period of diary keeping and follow-up interviews. Participants will record moments in their diaries when they recall theoretical concepts outside of formal research contexts, such as in personal conversations, on walks, watching TV, in relation to activism, etc..

The project draws on the growing body of scholarship that reframes doctoral education as a complex process involving and transforming 'the whole person' (for example, Burford, Elliot et al., Bryan and Guccione, Nuriler and Bengsten). I am curious about how this conceptualisation of research education overlaps with feminist approaches to theoretical work. Feminists have long argued that these practices should draw on the personal. For example, hooks argues that theory is liberatory when it reflects the everyday lives of the writer and reader. Analysis of the co-constructed narrative accounts will explore this overlap in view of the precarious conditions that have become the norm for humanities ECRs. To what extent do they experience theoretical research as personally liberatory? Does this form of attachment to their work help or hinder them as they seek to pursue theoretical research under precarity?

## References

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