Conceptualising Care in Higher Education (0248)

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Abstract
This paper argues that we need to problematise the absence of the affective in Higher Education (HE), by disrupting neoliberal process-orientated thinking to include care. In the health and social policy domains, which have undergone similar neoliberal reform to HE, the complexity and politics of care have been explored, demonstrating the way decisions are made around how and why support should be given, as well as illuminating the impact these decisions have on gender equality (Dalley, 1996). However, in HE limited discursive space has been given to considerations of care; it is either aligned to concepts such as kindness (Clegg and Rowland, 2010) or focuses on staff experiences (Lynch, 2010). While such research may illustrate the care-*less* nature of HE, problematically it doesn't illuminate either students' experiences or who is mis/recognised as requiring or being entitled to support. These absences can limit possibilities for achieving greater equality for students.

Paper
UK Higher Education (HE) has undergone significant reforms, influenced by neoliberal policy, over many decades. These are exemplified in the establishment of a mass marketised system of HE and the introduction of student fees, framing students as consumers (Brown and Carasso, 2013, Radice, 2013). Within these systems only some students are positioned as in need of support, which becomes 'individualistic and problem focused in its orientation' (Jacklin and Le Riche, 2009 p735). Support becomes framed as the desire to provide students with greater intelligence to navigate HE through the provision of information, or through the provision of financial support which students utilise to ensure their 'wellbeing'. In this paper I argue, however, that the affective aspects of student experience, particularly care, are problematically absent from these neoliberal systems of support and well-being.

Similar neoliberal reforms to those in HE have occurred in the domains of health and social policy, as seen in the implementation of 'community care', where care markets were introduced to empower individual choice. However unlike in HE, space has been specifically made in these domains to explore the affective implications of these practices, and how care is conceptualised (Dalley, 1996, Skidmore, 1994). There is also a clear publically acknowledged discourse that the absence of care in such systems is problematic, seen in the creation of the Care Quality Commission (CQC) which, albeit a neoliberal regulatory solution, seeks to redress the absences of care in the sector. In contrast, HE's quality regulator the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) does not incorporate affective notions such as care within its frameworks of a quality higher education. This is reflective of the tension which exists in education around the role of the affective more broadly and care in particular: on the one hand contemporary education is heavily influenced by Cartesian philosophy which doesn't place value on the affective instead promoting the development of students as rational independent academics (Lynch, 2010 p62). On the other hand, critics such as Noddings argue that educators 'should be committed to develop the capacity to care for others in all of our students' (Noddings, 1991 p3).

I suggest here that a consideration of the way in which care is explored in these other research and policy domains offers a very compelling argument for the importance of openly and clearly redressing the absence of conceptualisations of care in HE policy, practice and processes. The literature on community care shows care to be a complex, political and sophisticated concept. Dalley highlights this in her research exploring how the way care is conceptualised is not only very powerful but has significant implications for gender equality. She argues that neoliberal market practices in community care promote ideas of choice and freedom, by moving the discourses of who, how, and why people need, and should receive, care from the public to private domain. Care becomes conceptualised here as forming 'a unitary integral part of a woman's nature (which cannot be offloaded in the normal state of affairs)'(Dalley, 1996, p.14). This establishes 'possessive individualism' (Dalley, 1996, p.34-5) whereby the freedom and liberty articulated in policy discourses are actually false choices for many, limiting who can access certain types of support within the care market.

There is not a complete absence of research that looks specifically at care conceptualisations within higher education. Lynch for example specifically considers care in exploring the impact of 'New Managerialism' in HE on staff. She argues that through such practices a 'moral status is accorded to carelessness' (Lynch, 2010 p. 54) supporting the idea of the 'idealised worker as one that is available 24/7 without ties or responsibilities that will hinder her or his productive capabilities… precluding those who have care-full lives outside work' (Lynch, 2010,

p.57). Although Lynch does not explore the impact of either such discourses or such practices on students specifically, she does suggest that New Managerialism practices harbour 'a declining sense of responsibility for others, particularly for students'; however Lynch also highlights that care is structurally absent in HE which in turn has significance for students. This means, as Brooks in a study of student parents highlights, that systemic neoliberalism tends 'to erase the significance of structural inequalities, with the effect of making students believe that any difficulties they face are a result primarily of personal failures' (Brooks, 2012, p. 424). Such a sense of failure, combined with an absence of care, can have a significant detrimental impact on positive mental health (Lynch et al., 2009) which, in turn, can have a detrimental impact on higher education attainment (Friedli, 2009, p. III).

There does, therefore, seem to be a compelling need to break down the barriers of neoliberal process and make space for care. Research which looks at care aligned constructs like 'kindness' adds weight to this: Clegg and Rowland (2010, p. 719) in exploring kindness demonstrate that kindness is valued by students but is systemically seen as subversive as it cannot be 'regulated or prescribed'. However while kindness may have a positive impact on students' mental health and their experiences, kindness is just one narrow characteristic or aspect of care and, thus, exploring affect in higher education through this lens alone fails to capture the complexity of care as illuminated by both Dalley and Lynch.

To care, and be cared for, is inherent in what it is to be human; by failing to have an open discourse with the concept of care in HE researchers may miss illuminating the structural impact of a lack of care on students, as highlighted by Brooks; this may mean in turn, that under purely neoliberal processes-orientated thinking, some students can become misrecognised as requiring support. For these processes to go unchallenged can seriously impair students positive mental health, creating personal senses of failure for what are actually process failings; this in turn can impact on the degree students feel they belong, or matter to their university.

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