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'Care-less whispers' in the academy during COVID-19: A feminist collaborative autoethnography

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Abstract

This collaborative autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) has created a space for three women academics from working-class heritage, navigating the liminal and temporal space of the COVID-19 pandemic within a post-1992 Higher Education Institution, to explore the social relations of one Higher Education Institution and confront their lived experiences. The stories shared in this paper are analysed through a 'care-less' (Rogers, 2017) lens, which asks the academy to recognise and confront the duplicity and self-glorification of policy and practice, that might be viewed as acts of normalising and supporting care-less cultures and behaviours. The paper raises questions about social justice, diversity and inclusion, the intersectionality of class and gender, and the inequity of the lived experiences from those who sit on the margins. The paper is the first collaborative writing project from a newly formed staff network of academics who come from working-class backgrounds, and we are intentional in our commitment to support each other as new researchers, giving agency in support of the other to find their voice.

Keywords: care-less spaces; working-class heritage; feminism; Covid-19; autoethnography

1. Introduction

This paper examines the lived experiences of three women from working-class backgrounds who are employed as academics in a post-1992 university. It is recognised that our research is about our 'selves', and thus the writing of our critical reflections as part of the research methodology is unapologetically personal. Within this work, we position ourselves as both working-class, and feminists which also acknowledges the 'centrality of gender as an organising principle in all social systems' (Sprague, 2016, p. vii) which is ever present, but not to the exclusion of considerations about social class. Therefore, it is no coincidence that we take a reflexive feminist approach (Reay, 2000a, 2004) to discuss our positions and experiences within the space of 'the academy', during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We acknowledge that the term 'working-class academic' is a slippery and contested term so before we explore our experiences, we want to offer our

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position on what this term means for us. We acknowledge we may no longer have the right to claim to be working-class as we are now all firmly situated within the middle-class by the nature of our profession; yet the legacy of a working-class heritage is evident, and important to us and pervades our stories. Our collective definition of working-class is the class group at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the precariat (Savage, 2015), which share low household income, are likely to rent property, have few social ties with associates in higher-status occupations, and has limited cultural capital. This, we argue, has shaped the way we act and perceive the academy. We also struggle with the idea of 'the academic', as for us this conjures up a certain image of someone who spends their time engaged in 'being an academic'; they are professional thinkers and communicators who enjoy reading scholarly books and journals, writing, talking with other academics, challenging grand theory for pleasure as well as part of their profession. Our academic identity is not that well-formed – we use the term academic as a signifier of our occupation.

Within and across institutions, the experiences of academics within Higher Education Institutions are often homogenised as a middle-class norm. Therefore, it is important to us to speak out and to speak up on behalf of those of us raised in working-class households who have a different experience. Thus, the motivation behind this paper was to explore our experiences, as women from working-class heritage working in academia during the first Covid-19 lockdown, through feminist collaborative autoethnography.

The stimulus for this paper came from Rogers' (2017) paper entitled '"I'm complicit and I'm ambivalent and that's crazy": Care-less spaces for women in the academy'. We had all experienced the sometimes care-less nature of our own institution, and the wider context of higher education as whole, at some point during this period. Drawing on Rogers (2016) care ethics model, developed in response to the continued dehumanisation of intellectually disabled people, we explore this concept of care ethics and care-less spaces (2016; 2017) based on our own classed and gendered experiences in higher education; but we are certain that the experiences may resonate with colleagues in other institutions. The care ethics model (Rogers 2016; 2017) offers three spheres of caring and care-full work which are currently populated with care-less spaces; 'the emotional caring sphere, where love and care are psycho-socially questioned; the practical caring sphere where day to day care is carried out relationally; and, the socio-political caring sphere, where social intolerance and aversion to difficult differences are played out' (Rogers, 2016, p.116). These three spheres all interact in complex ways and are grounded in social and political relations that seek caring legal and cultural processes. These three spheres interact with each other and are 'grounded in social and political relations that promote human flourishing and social relations' (Lithari and Rogers, 2017, p.3). In contrast Rogers (2017) argues that a care-less space is a space in which care-less-ness predominates over an ethics of care. Furthermore, she argues that care-less spaces can damage, thwart, and contest caring work which permeates the emotional, practical and socio-political spheres of everyday activity (Rogers, 2017). In this paper, we argue that higher education institutions can sometimes be a 'care-less' space.

To study stories about classed and gendered experiences is to situate them in relation to the structures of the spaces in which they arise (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p. 73). We work in a post-1992 university in what has typically has been called a teaching university as opposed to a research-intensive institution, although our research culture is developing. We are a university that needs to recruit rather than select (Rolfe, 2003) and a fall in intake, coupled with high attrition rates, can have a significant impact on the numbers of courses, departments and staff. A post-1992 university like our own presents a different cultural environment to that of a more prestigious or traditional university. In common with many post-1992 institutions, our university contains a statistically higher proportion of first-generation university attendees from working-class or minority ethnic backgrounds and mature students, those aged over 23 years; and 32 percent of the students study part-time. Furthermore, many more of our colleagues come from non-traditional academic backgrounds compared to a more traditional university setting. One would think that this environment is a more care-full space (Rogers, 2016; 2017) than more traditional or elite institutions. However, class is still a complex marker of the 'other' in academia (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Coulson *et al*., 2018). We suggest that our identities as academics who are women from working-class origins and the identity of the Higher Education sector in which the research is situated are both fragile, as far as they are both sensitive and vulnerable to real and perceived external constraints.

Like Rogers (2017), we explore mistrust, complicity, and discomfort within the academy. We seek to contribute to this discussion by reflecting on our experiences in the context of the COVID–19 pandemic. We posit that the pandemic undermined the ability of universities to provide spaces for academic staff that honour a care ethics model (Rogers, 2016; 2017). At present, it seems to us that because of the coronavirus, advances made towards equality and equity are under great threat for all women, but especially those women from the working-class, who have been disproportionally affected because of the pandemic (United Nations, 2020, Warren and Lyonette, 2020). As the sector's leaders tried to manage the multiplicity of demands to ensure institutional survival, academics grappled with their new virtual worlds of teaching, virtual meetings and building relationships with students and colleagues on-line. It is in this new reality that the need for care takes on whole new meanings. For each of us, this has meant accentuating the relational, ethical and methodological dimensions of our work.

The relational dimension of our work is illuminated by the stories we share; stories of self which are honest and reveal our vulnerability. Seeking to model, in our own storying, the complexity of interplay of factors, we use narrative to reveal deeper understandings, in an unmasking process (Bruner, 2002). We provide evidence of how the spheres of caring leak into and out of private and public life for women academics who were raised in working-class households, raising questions about whether the academic space is safe, care-full and just. We explore the 'isolations of capitalism' (Bergman and Montgomery, 2017, p. X) exacerbated by a pandemic that is evidently impacting more on those marginalised in the academy and the wider society (Crooks, 2020).

2. Methodology

Feminist collaborative autoethnography

Autoethnography is a means to illuminate social phenomena, experiences, and identities that would be difficult to capture otherwise (McDonald, 2016). This work will contribute to the growing body of work which uses the autoethnographic voice to expose the invisibility of power structures within the academy (Nichols and Stahl, 2019; Moriarty, 2020). A feminist autoethnography, drawing on the work of Allen and Piercy (2005) is "a method of being, knowing and doing that combines two concerns: telling the stories of those who are marginalized and making good use of our experience" (2005, p. 156). Eschewing traditional research conventions and embracing our emotions and subjective experiences, we invite the reader to share our lived human experiences (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) as we tried to adjust to what was happening in our institution as it reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, researching within a feminist research praxis, in our bid to connect the personal to the cultural (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) we came together and collaboratively wondered about our experiences (Bolander and Smith, 2020), as we adjusted to these exceptional circumstances. Our storying together grew from a developing relationship forged at meetings of the newly established staff network for academics who come from a working-class background, which had been meeting for the previous 18 months. The network, or call to form a collective in solidarity, was established by Author 3. This group now provides a space for care-full relationships based on honest and trusting relationships. Offering a means to go beyond individual storytelling and reflection, through collective reflection and critique of personal stories of this period, we turned to collaborative autoethnography (Nordbäck, Hakonen and Tienari, 2022). In this way our feminist collaborative autoethnography created a transitional and intermediate space in which we were able to explore our precarity with academia.

Research approach

Prompted by a discussion that has become the first autoethnography below, we wrote our individual autoethnographies so that we could record our different experiences and perspectives of academia, as they were happening to us as individuals. The stories were written in June and July 2020, four months into the first period of lockdown in England that began at the end of March 2020. During this time there had been a seismic shift in the way that academics were teaching, researching, and interacting.

Later, we came together to talk about writing, in a process of collective analysis. As we talked, we recognised commonalities or absences of the three mutually interactive spheres of caring and care-full work; emotional caring, practical caring, and socio-political caring (Rogers, 2017) within our experiences. This formed the basis of the discussion below. It is important to acknowledge however, that these stories are only partial representations of what happened during this time. We took a collaborative approach to determining what these autoethnographies illustrated. The themes were generated through a joint discussion of mutual challenge.

Ethical Issues

Auto/biographical work appears to convey lots of academic freedom, but it also carries with it, significant responsibilities. There is no denying, that 'research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical concerns still produces undeniably dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insights that upsets institutions' (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994, p.138). Whilst we are speaking out against some of the care-less practices in Higher Education Institutions (HEI), we are mindful, that this research is being conducted at a time of high emotional and financial stakes. We have already written about the fragile identity of our own institution, as we experience it, so we need to be particularly vigilant, indeed care-full (Rogers, 2017) about how the data concerning our own organisation is presented so that it does not damage the reputation of the institution, or the sector. We have tried to write sensitively about the moral, ethical, and financial challenges senior leaders within the organisation are facing, as we have no desire to criticise any one person or groups of individuals. We truly recognise the constraints that they, we, are under, and in the spirit of this work we have taken extra care to record events as accurately as we could by sticking as closely as we can to the facts as we remember or indeed interpreted them. We maintain that other characters are sufficiently well disguised, so that readers outside the context of our exploration will not be able to recognise them. We can do no more than reinforce our conviction that we have done all we can to act in a respectful and careful way. Writing autoethnographically has also meant our voices cannot be disguised so we have had to consider carefully how much of our stories we wanted to tell. We reserve the right to be self-governing in a bid to safeguard our own well-being.

The case for care-lessness

This next section presents the chronology of the conversations that prompted our thinking about the carelessness of the institution. Prompted by the first story about author one's endeavours to source an office chair as we made the transition to teaching from home, we, three women from working-class heritage, recorded our own thoughts and responses to this initial event. For this reason, we have included the vignettes to invite the reader to respond to our experiences or reflect on their own experiences.

3. Author 1's story: 'The Chairgate Complex'

Here, I reflect on my lived experience, as an academic who has working-class origins, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is the apparent assumption within our organisation and probably within the sector that its workforce possesses sufficient resources to transform their homes into a makeshift office overnight.

At the beginning of lockdown in March 2020, I initially panicked at the thought of homeworking, as although I possessed a laptop, it was ancient and slow. I had no workstation in my home, little space to put one, and no phone with free minutes that I could use for work. Furthermore, I didn't even own a desk and office chair. I do not run a car, which further restricted my ability to gain access to office furniture at this time. Therefore, for the first three months of lockdown, my best option was to work lying in bed propped up by cushions. I was unable to use the camera for lectures and tutorials, as I was too embarrassed to let my students see me working lying down in bed. I also looked and sounded dreadful, as I contracted a virus in early April that I suspected to be COVID-19 but was unable to get tested. I felt exhausted for months afterwards.

In this space I worked long days with few breaks to cope with the tsunami of work generated by a need for enhanced pastoral care from understandably anxious students, the instant switch from face-to-face to online teaching delivery, updated policy documents, new health and safety requirements, and seemingly endless programme administration. Eight months on I have finally managed to borrow a chair from a friend (not an office chair, but a chair nevertheless!), although I am still working at a semi-dismantled dressing table, and I suffer from constant backache. Doing my job without a work phone has also been particularly difficult to manage when there are so many students in really difficult situations. Although I am privileged enough to have my own household space, the noise from neighbours is highly distracting. As we approach winter, heating bills are a constant worry. Spending 20 hours per day, six days per week in the same room would be mentally challenging enough, but I don't have time to think too much about that in addition to everything else.

While this situation has been less than ideal, the thing that has caused me the most discomfort is being made to feel that somehow 'I' was unusual and at fault in lacking these resources. Online meetings and video presentations have allowed us all to gaze through private windows into each other's personal lives via the screen. Some of the views through the window have been replete with home-offices and adequate computing equipment; a far cry from the online tutorials conducted from my bed. Risk assessment forms that require staff to assess the suitability of their 'workstation' and 'their equipment' appear to assume an existing level of resources that does not necessarily reflect reality. I have found the 'business as usual' approach has placed a high pressure on academics who are struggling daily to complete their work in these conditions.

4. Author 2's story: 'Oh, you don't have a room of your own'

The following reflection was written in response to my colleague writing about not having a chair, the assumptions made about our private spaces and the danger of the lens through which we see and make inferences about our lived experiences. I recognise the many privileges that I have now, a room of my own, with a desk, a chair, my own computer and a dodgy printer. But I really do not take these for granted. I do know what it is like not to have a room of your own. Growing up, sharing the bedroom with my elder and younger sister, each of us struggling for a space.

I remember not having space. I remember, not having a home. At 16 years old, we were temporarily homeless after our house was taken away from us because it was tied to the job my dad had. The job went, the house went. We were homeless. A family of 7 with 2 dogs, without a room of our own. That coincided with the time I was taking my O Levels. All I wanted was a room of my own. Not just a room of my own, a home to share with my family. After several months of sofa surfing at our grandparents' homes, we were rehoused. Seven of us and one dog moved into a very small 2 ½ bedroom house. One of the bedrooms, which my two brothers shared, was not big enough for one bed, but my dad built small bunk beds for the two of them.

This period of COVID-19 has brought my own family back home; my twenty-four-year-old son, returning to live with us after living independently for six years; my daughter, who has a disability - all her carefully planned activities stopped - all her hard-fought independence snatched away. We are locked in!

Unlike my homelessness in the past, my daughter has a room of her own, my son has a room has a room of his own, I have a room of my own, and well, my partner, also working from home, has the dining room! We all have a computer, a desk, a chair and the privilege of room of our own. But it has been hard, and at times we have fought and argued and desperately needed more space.

I look at my colleagues, I look at my students, and I know that my privileged position now is special. I am fortunate. But I never assume that everyone has this space, or any space, a room of their own. I was once told by one of my colleagues to take the chip off my shoulder. Stop talking about being working-class, your background, your struggle. Move on. But that chip is my shoulder. That chip is who I am; my struggle to get a room of my own means that I never take it for granted or assume that everyone has this luxury.

If you have experienced poverty once in your life there is always a fear that you would/could return so the lived reality of my colleague, my friends and my students, who are sharing their space with young children and a dog, or their bedroom with their two siblings, or in a house share with seven other tenants, or a bedsit with just one room for eating, living and sleeping and no outdoor space; is so much visceral than if you had never experienced such things. That is why I am talking about the experience of people who originate from working-class backgrounds in the academy.

5. Author 3's story: 'Trimming the fat'

The lockdown, and working from home in the subsequent months, has made me raise questions about many aspects of my professional, and indeed my personal life. Presenting my vulnerable 'self' I share the most significant features in institutional working patterns this year that I feel have been detrimental to my career.

In my experience of working in higher education, as a woman from a working-class background, I have always felt that there have been practices in place that hinder or silence the individual and collective voices of those of us who are not white, male and middle-class. I am not suggesting that this is a deliberate or even conscious practice, but my voice seems to always be overshadowed by the dominant group in the academy. In contrast with the silence and obedience to authority, which seems to be the appropriate demeanour in the academy, I know I practise a more direct communication style, which is often more expressive of my feelings than most of my colleagues; I appreciate this makes me appear confrontational, truculent or belligerent, but this really is not my intention at all. Now with so many virtual meetings, the gap between whose voice gets heard and whose voice doesn't seem to have grown even wider. With meetings now being driven by a 'crisis' imperative there are even fewer opportunities to raise questions or get one's voice heard, especially if that is a critical voice.

As in many other institutions I suspect, we are constantly hearing messages to 'trim the fat' from planning, preparation and assessment tasks in order to prioritise the emotional and cognitive needs of our students. Whilst simultaneously we are 'expected' to take full responsibility for our own emotional and psychological well-being. When I have spoken out about these paradoxical demands, I have been made to feel as though I am being selfish or obstructive – with references being made like "we have all got to roll up our sleeves" or "we are all working above and beyond, you are not the only one". People like me, who raise questions, have often become labelled as dissenters, troublemakers or worse 'blockers' of change or innovation; thus, creating an effective tool with which to silence those of us whose ideas go against the dominant view. I have decided not to attend meetings or engage with those who do not/will not hear me as I have found that meetings are no longer places share opinions or raise questions.

Significantly, as an early career researcher, I have had my research hours cut to zero because of the imperative to attract and retain students, and the resultant significant increase in administration and teaching. Only those colleagues with academic outputs that contribute to the Research Excellence Framework retained their research hours. As an early career researcher this has had a devasting impact on my career development and my identity as I struggle to find my place in the academy.

6. Analysis and discussion

Through our storying, we have used the lens of "care-less spaces", and the three spheres of caring; emotional caring, practical caring and socio-political caring, (Rogers, 2017) to examine our lived experiences of being a woman in academia who comes from a working-class background. Through the process of writing and talking we were able to explore the private and public self, yet we recognise that our stories are contingent, temporal, fluid and continuous (Clandinin, 2013) thus providing a 'site of exploration and struggle' (Richardson, 1997, p.87). We intentionally privilege our voices, our stories; to turn up the volume on gender and class in the academy. However, whilst we were able to recognise the often care-less responses of the academy towards academics, especially women who have less capital, during the Covid-19 pandemic we were not able to separate the spheres or understand their impact individually, because they are all so interconnected and so closely intertwined.

Care-less behaviours in the academy

Our stories reveal how the bureaucratic and systematic response to the pandemic led to an intensification of the labour that became central to academic work; teaching rapidly moved on-line. As academics it was assumed that we would easily adapt to this new way of working, which was in direct contrast to care-full relational action (Rogers, 2017), whilst at the same time managing our own psycho-social responses to what was happening in our own lives. It is well documented that the global pandemic placed a disproportionate strain on women in the workplace in general; with the increase in unpaid care work, with children out-of-school, and increased care needs of older persons (United Nations, 2020, Warren and Lyonette, 2020). Furthermore, a recent report found that women in academia were more likely than their male counterparts to be facing extra childcare and domestic duties, which negatively impacted their output of published works and involvement in their realms of expertise (Amano-Patiño et al., 2020; Gabster et al., 2020). This is borne out by the withdrawal of research hours for Author 3, and the recognition of privilege despite extra caring responsibilities by author two.

The theme that unites our three narratives, is the idea of 'class work' which (Gray and Kish-Gephardt, 2013), drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, explains how class differences impact people's evaluations of each other. Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) theoretical framework explains how social class advantage and disadvantage are enacted within organisations and are sustained through the interactions of different class members and groups. Our stories reveal how individual acts of class work have led to institutionalised structures that have failed to recognise that some academics do not have adequate resources to work at home during the pandemic. These cumulative, self-reinforcing institutional practices legitimate organisational norms (Gray and Kish-Gephart, 2013) failing to recognise the additional challenges of women and academics from working-class backgrounds, based on an assumption that all academics share the same habitus and have the same amount of social and economic capital to support working from home. The assumption that all academic staff could absorb a greater workload into their 'home' life without the resources to support that was not recognised and had a significant impact on those lecturers – typically women who lack the financial resources, childcare or space to accommodate a 'home-office' as Author 1 has so articulately explained ......'the thing that has caused me the most discomfort is the feeling that somehow 'I' am unusual in lacking these resources' (Author 1). Author one's concern that she did not have an office desk and chair let alone an office left her feeling vulnerable and was detrimental to her professional and academic identity - 'I was too embarrassed to let my students see me working lying down in bed' (Author 1). This is a key feature of care-less practices which individualise the lived experience of inequality, in which 'those that have' disavow the collective experience of those 'who have not'; something we have all described in our autoethnographies.

In our narratives, we have identified that the norms that constitute a care-less space have become exaggerated in the response to COVID-19, and this has contributed to our feelings of illegitimacy and unworthiness at a time when we all needed to feel that we belonged and were cared for. Phrases such as 'business as usual' and 'you must remain positive', are illustrative of care-less activity within all caring spheres, serving only to shut down conversations about the real-world challenges that are being faced by academics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly then, our initial interpretations of some of the acts of care-less-ness were interpreted as personal failings, rather than seeing these actions as systemic gender and class inequity (Grummell et al. 2009).

The subversion of emotional and socio-political caring (Rogers, 2017) experienced by us all, such as points being ignored in meetings and being told to ‘stop talking about the chip on your shoulder’ (Author 2) were clearly indicative of Rogers’ (2017) conception of a care-less space. The acts of micro-aggression of being told to have a more positive attitude, being missed out of email communications, or seeing our contributions not being acknowledged, combine to further engender a sense of not being valued or being seen as insignificant (Honneth, 2007). In all our stories, it is evident that at times our emotions, were denied especially if they posed a potential to challenge the status quo which Bourdieu (1984) would argue is a form of symbolic violence. The crisis in higher education brought on by Covid-19 has allowed a particularly care-less form of competitive individualism to flourish. Some colleagues, notably those driven by aggressive competitiveness have intensified and elasticised the working day expecting their academic colleagues to do the same i.e., to undertake much of their work in their own time (Lynch, 2010). The increased demands for performativity have, as we have shown, had high emotional costs on those of us who might already feel vulnerable in the academy.

To us, Higher Education Institutions seemed to be rewarding compliance and conformity; kindness and generosity seems to have all but disappeared; replaced instead with mistrust, complicity and discomfort within academic roles and relationships (Rogers, 2017). Author three’s assertion ‘I have found that meetings are no longer safe places to share opinions or raise questions’ illustrates the use of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1994) which largely goes unrecognized and unacknowledged, in the care-less space. The feelings of not belonging to the institutional habitus (Reay, 2000b) as a woman from a working-class heritage as described in our narratives has always been there, but COVID-19 isolation of homeworking has meant that acts of silencing, marginalisation and feelings of exclusion have become more apparent and more painful to the individual. And of course, there was the assumption that the care of one’s own wellbeing is an individual responsibility rather than one shared with the institution.

The stories which normalised an expectation of having a chair, a desk, a room of your own, gave a sense a glossing over of the impact of multi-tasking which many women academics and students were taking on: working or studying full-time, home school and caring for shielding parents. Although our stories are individual stories, they could also be what Richardson (1997) calls a ‘collective story……… a story which tells the experience of a sociologically constructed category of people in the context of larger socio-cultural and historical forces’ (1997, p.14). We argue that care-less-ness within the academy is premised on the classical objectivist view of scholarly work, namely that it is separate from emotional thought and feeling; this seems to have been accepted, expected and endorsed through the commercialisation of higher education markets in recent times (Lynch, 2010) and has been exacerbated by the pandemic. We recognised the burden of bureaucratic work hindered our ability to be creative and led to self-censorship based on an understanding of what can and can’t be said. Surveillance, including self-surveillance, had become institutionalised in everyday life since lockdown began, and working from home became ‘the fabrication of image over substance’ (Lynch, 2010, p.55).

We conclude that working under a high level of scrutiny during the pandemic has led to a culture of compliance for many of our colleagues and has in turn left all three of us feeling a sense of personal inauthenticity. We have all felt, as Lynch (2010) points out, a ‘deep alienation in the experience of living to perform’ (p.55) especially when we feel that much of the activity is adding value to our teaching and research. This all points to a dereliction of all three caring spheres. However, we also learnt that the real, and most valuable lessons of the pandemic did not evolve out of our day-to-day academic work, but out of the relationship with each other as women with a common heritage founded on precarity. The relationship between the authors of this paper was one based on trust, and honesty, and it is hoped that the spirit of the writing is evident to the reader. Our motivation to tell our stories was to shine a light on some acts of care-less-ness within the socio-political context of a university in the most unique of circumstances.

7. Concluding remarks

Within the existing tensions of COVID-19, our gendered and classed lens, exacerbated by the pervasive cultural performativity higher education context (Ball, 2017), emboldened a sense-making of our stories. Whilst we appreciated that the challenges of homeworking during the pandemic were to some extent inevitable for all, an exploration of the extra difficulties that women from working-class backgrounds were facing felt important to us.

It is widely acknowledged that universities have been hierarchical and patriarchal institutions (Morley, 1999), and in 2020 decisions that impacted on us all in the academy, and indeed in wider society, were largely being made by white, middle-class, managers. Driven by fear and 'academic capitalism', whereby Higher Education Institutions increasingly exist as a cog within a global economic environment dominated by principles of neoliberalism (Slaughter and Leslie, 2001), competition, profit at all costs, loss of autonomy, and conformity (Roumbanis, 2018) resulted in a rise of market-like, or care-less, behaviours in universities. Increased intensification and bureaucratisation of lecturers' work during the pandemic, in a bid to respond quickly to the market and our competitors, produced a careless and mean-spirited way of doing academia (Back, 2016) as illustrated in our narratives. With COVID-19 continuing to have a huge economic impact on universities there have been adverse effects and affects (Hey, 2011) on all staff as the pressure for boundaryless work increased (Morley, 2010). In our case, we observed a 'business as usual' (Author 1) mantra even in the face of a global pandemic. Yet, a veneer of collegiality within the institution masked a culture of performativity and competitive individualism and this seemed to become a necessity in response to the COVID-19 crisis where all three spheres of caring (Rogers, 2017) are only valued if they are professionalised (Lynch, 2010).

The policy micro politics as enacted within universities has an impact on the lived experience of the culturally marginal, like us, who are perceived as the 'other' (Hoyle, 1982). We have no doubt that beneath the carapace there is a mass of conflicts, tensions, resentment, competing interests and power imbalances that influence everyday interactions within the organisation that affect us all, but particularly those of us on the margins. There is no denying that, as our stories have illustrated, we, women who come from working-class origins, are often subjected to a kind of cultural imperialism that renders us silent through small but significant acts of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1994), in the form of a lack of recognition or disrespect, even within the most intimate of intellectual spaces. The academy has been described as a place where 'systemically gendered cultural, social and structural arrangements' (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007, p. 13) are normalised in such a way women [and the people who are considered working-class] are perceived as the problem; sadly, this is what we found during this most challenging of times. Thus, the pandemic has illuminated what has always been; the assumptions about academic work prefaced on middle-class and masculine practice, or the 'male model of working' (Collinson and Hearn, 1996). It seems to us that care-less spaces within the academy have become more pervasive and pernicious and have developed as a faster rate as academics have been restricted emotionally and practically (Skelton, 2005). This paper has provided an opportunity to have our voices heard in a caring space.

Critical hope

The motivation for this small piece of autoethnographic research was to ground our work in women's ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986). Using evocative autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) we have been able to recognise that the act of homogenising academics' experience represents a care-less space. Adopting a feminist stance, we have explored the ways in which dominant knowledge practices disadvantage us as women by excluding us from enquiry; denigrating their 'feminine' cognitive styles and modes of knowledge; and producing theories of social phenomena that render women's activities and interests, or gendered power relations, invisible (Anderson, 2020). Our research was political, in that it aimed to disrupt normalised, sexist structures through integrating diversity into the ordinary work of an institution; what Ahmed (2012) calls 'diversity work'. As feminist scholars we put women first; we were caring. Our storying has enabled us to share our own experiences in a care-full space in which we have questioned the concept of care psycho-socially and cared about each other at a practical level (Rogers, 2017).

As a group of women who come from working class backgrounds, we have created one caring space in our institution where working-class academics can meet and talk about the care-less-ness of the institution honestly and openly without fear of being judged. The network called ‘We Need to Talk about Class’, adapted from the book title ‘We Need to Talk about Kevin’, (Shriver, 2003), acknowledges that the magnitude of class invisibility in Higher Education establishments is being disavowed. The group meets monthly; we talk about what is happening to us and try to find ways in which we can better support ourselves and each other, which obversely is inevitably building a critique of our own institution. In juxtaposition to the wider organisation, this group has provided a space when care-full relationships can be built. We have a long-term goal of addressing class inequality within the academy through making the lived experience of academics, particularly women, from working-class heritage more visible and widely acknowledged. We argue as, did Butterwick and Dawson (2005), if ‘we do not speak publicly about, and critically, the problematic conditions of life and work within our own academic walls then our credibility as critics and analysis of what is going on in the world outside them is bound to be similarly diminished’ (p. 64). The ‘We Need to talk About Class’ group has enabled us to develop and nurture our own and collective voice. In this spirit, we have endeavoured to realistically appraise our institutional practices through a lens of ‘critical hope’ (Bishundat et al., 2018), with a view to developing a better future within our institution and the wider sector.

We hope that the recent imperative for collective activity amongst academics from working-class backgrounds through the introduction of cross-institutional spaces, such as the Association of Working-Class Academics and the International Working-Class Academics Conference will enable mechanisms for ‘othered’ voices to rise to the fore. We encourage a ‘call to arms’ amongst other academics from the working-class, to enter these spheres of resistance and challenge the normalisation of unjust institutional practices that reproduce and conceal white, male, elitism.

You are not alone:

> Misshapes, mistakes, misfits
> Raised on a diet of broken biscuits, oh
> We don't look the same as you
> And we don't do the things you do
> But we live around here, too, oh really
>
> (Pulp, ‘Misshapes’ – A Different Class, 1995)

Care ‘is not a strange activity which is undertaken by a few brave souls, but it is ingrained into the existence of every person’ (Herring, 2013, p. 45). We have operated in a care-full way in authoring this paper. We have considered care-fully how we have presented our organisation; in a way that embodies respect, responsibility, human safety, and trust as championed by Rogers (2017).

8. Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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