

Writing/drawing care-based equity into practice: A research- and art-based collaboration about caring responsibilities in academia

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To cite this article:

Moreau, M-P & Galman, SC 2021, 'Writing/drawing care-based equity into practice: A research- and art-based collaboration about caring responsibilities in academia', *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 40–52.

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Abstract

Carers are a group of particular significance to society, who contribute precious time and energy to other people's needs and, simply put, enable society to operate (Tronto 1993). Yet, in many settings, they are largely rendered invisible and misrecognised. This is the case in academia where the figure of the 'bachelor boy' (Edwards 1993) has long prevailed and, linked to this, carers have been 'written out' of higher education narratives. In this article, we reflect on our experience of developing a research- and art-based collaborative project (*Fostering a sense of belonging for higher education staff and students with caring responsibilities*) which involved the production of a series of drawings shared online and, in the course of the forthcoming months, through campus-based exhibitions (Moreau & Galman 2021). Through comics-based research, we seek to distance ourselves from the conventions of academia to expose its care-free norms and how they frame the experiences of carers and non-carers in ways which are diverse, fluid and intersectional. We also seek to encourage the development of social, including writing/drawing, practices which are equitable to all, including carers. Writing and publishing can be exclusionary processes and the arts are not immune to this. However, we argue that the arts do more than enhance accessibility but have the potential to challenge forms of academic writing which have historically 'written out' carers and care work.

Keywords: carers, comics, writing, drawing

Introduction

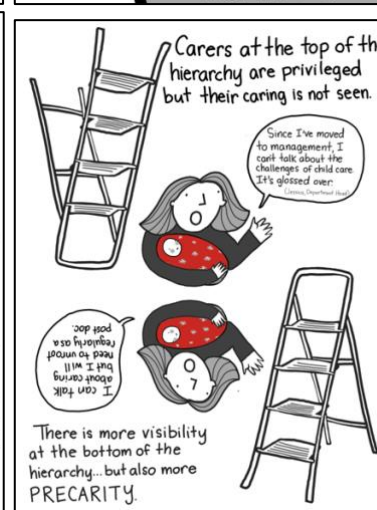
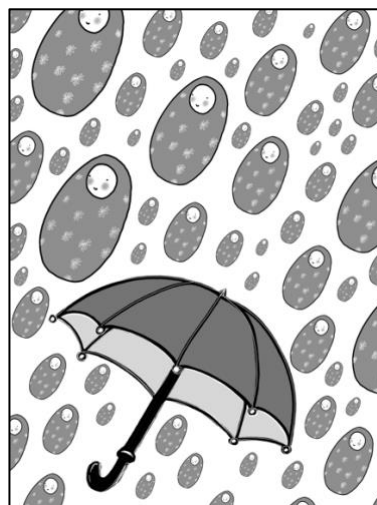
Carers are a group of particular significance to society, who contribute precious time and energy to other people's needs and, simply put, enable society to operate (Tronto, 1993). Yet, in many settings, they are largely rendered invisible and misrecognised. This is the case in academia where the figure of the 'bachelor boy' (Edwards, 1993) has long prevailed and, linked to this, carers have been 'written out' of higher education narratives. In this article, we reflect on the work we developed as part of the *Fostering a sense of belonging for higher education staff and students with caring responsibilities* project, a research- and art-based collaboration between the two authors, which took place in 2020 and 2021. The project involved the production of a series of drawings shared online and, in the course of the following months, through campus-based exhibitions (Moreau & Galman 2021). Through comics-based research, we seek to distantiate ourselves from the conventions of academia to expose its care-free norms and how they frame the experiences of carers and non-carers in ways which are diverse, fluid and intersectional. We also seek to encourage the development of social, including writing/drawing, practices which are equitable to all, including carers.

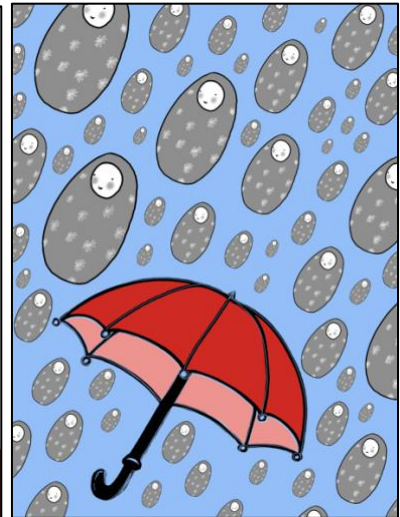
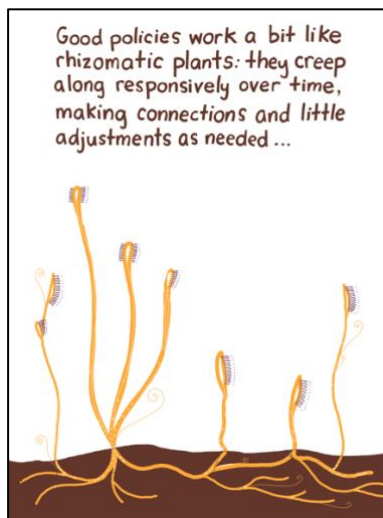
Troubling the care-free norms of academia requires, among other things, to ponder on the production of academic texts and how writing and publishing can be exclusionary processes, including, though not only, for carers (see Lumb & Ndagijimana 2021, in this issue). Academic writing in particular can (and often does) constitute a site of symbolic violence (Connell 2007): which stories get to be told or erased, through which experiential and theoretical lenses, by whom? Who owns the cultural capital and academic habitus necessary to grasp academic conventions? Who gets to claim a positional identity as a (care-free) scholar and writer? The arts are not an unproblematic medium either and accusations of elitism against the art world abound (Burke & McManus 2011). However, we do argue that art-based research has potential to trouble imbalances of power and hegemonic academic conventions in ways the written form cannot.

Further to presenting the outcomes of our comic-based research, we reflect on writings about care in research academic circles, before presenting our attempt, through this art- and research-informed collaboration, to write/draw care-based and other equities into practice. We then conclude by looking at how we can disrupt or trouble care-free academic norms in pandemic times.

The art work



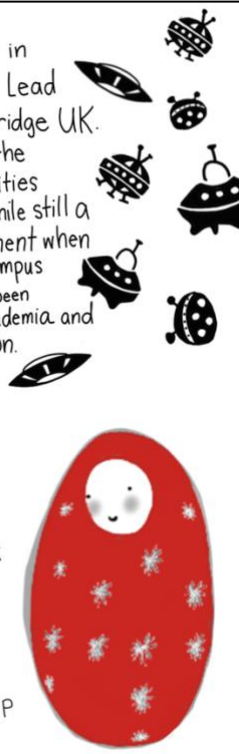




Marie-Pierre Moreau is Professor in Education and Education research Lead at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge UK. Her research is concerned with the formation of identities and inequalities in education and at work. In 2008-09, while still a PhD student, she had a eureka moment when taking her daughter, Nina, to the campus nursery. Since then, Marie-Pierre has been researching the lives of carers in academia and has no intention to stop anytime soon.

Sally Campbell Galman is Professor of Child and Family Studies @ the University of Massachusetts @ Amherst. She wrote and illustrated this piece while at home as a single parent of three children during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The irony of doing THIS work during the pandemic was astonishing as she witnessed how COVID continues to disproportionately affect female academics, up close and in real time. You can learn more about her arts-based scholarship at sallycampbellgalman.com.

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Writing about care in academia: Gazing into the void and grappling with deficit discourses

Feminist authors such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, writing about the English, French and broader European context, have pondered about the socio-cultural norms which posit the incompatibility of ('serious') writing and forms of work associated with femininity (de Beauvoir 1949; Woolf 1929). Yet the sociology of education, and of higher education in particular, has often ignored care/rs. Writing from a so called universalist perspective (although one better described as masculinist), some sociologists of higher education have given surprisingly limited consideration to equity matters, constructing instead the learner and the educator as disembodied. Like the 'universal' citizen of the philosophy of Enlightenment imagined by Descartes and his contemporaries (1996 [1641]), this rational subject of academic knowledge often conceals a White, abled, cisgendered masculine body, which, because it is unmarked and taken as the norm, remains invisible and, ultimately, power-wielding (Delphy 2010; H  ritier 2002; Puwar 2004).

Yet the feminist and other critical onto-epistemologies and politics which have emerged since the 1960s have challenged the old frameworks (Bowles & Duelli-Klein 1983; Freire 1972; hooks 1994). Linked to these, social class, gender, ethnicity, age and occasionally sexuality and disability have become prevalent concerns in some social sciences departments, though by no means all. More recently, an extensive scholarship has challenged the denial of emotions, domestic and bodily matters characteristic of higher education research (Ahmed 1998; Leathwood & Hey 2009). Carers, however, as a group, have continued, in the main, to be ignored. Moreover, the visibility and recognition of care is selective, fluid and marked by gender, sexuality, social class and ethnicity (Moreau & Robertson 2017 & 2019).

Gazing at the field of care and higher education, it appears that carers as a category of its own is a relatively new entrant to the field. Earlier research explored the experiences of mature students and/or mothers 'returning' to education (Edwards 1993), but this work rarely centred on care and when it did, nearly always focused on mothering. Likewise, work on women in academia often touches upon motherhood, overlooking other forms of caring (Ward & Wolf-Wendel 2004). The late noughties seem to have marked a turn, with the emergence of a body of work on student parents (Danna Lynch 2008). More recently, the carers category has gained momentum and become more inclusive as other categories of care work are considered, including caring for humans and non-humans (Henderson et al. 2018).

Yet research on carers in academia has not gone fully 'mainstream', with hegemonic onto-epistemologies and theories left broadly untouched by these developments. Deficit discourses of caregivers and other 'non-traditional' groups (students and staff alike) continue to misrecognise those who do care work and to construct academia and care as mutually exclusive, leading to performances of academic and carer identities which nearly always threaten to invalidate each other (Moreau & Kerner 2015). Rare is research in higher education which constructs care as the central tenet of society Tronto (1993) claims it to be and even rarer is research which critically engages with how the norms of academia render invisible or misrecognise those with care. Care instead is constructed through individualised, deficit discourses as a burdensome commodity, albeit one incorporated into neoliberal agendas seeming to maximise financial benefits through the marketisation of equity (Lynch et al. 2012).

Writing equity into practice: A research- and art-based collaboration

The project underpinning this article, *Fostering a sense of belonging for higher education staff and students with caring responsibilities*, was born out of a concern that, despite the steady growth of research on carers in academia, carers and research on carers remained invisible and misrecognised (Fraser 2008), as ‘mainstream’ research and policy circles continued to operate broadly untouched by research in this area. This is not of course specific to care and is an ongoing challenge for all equality issues and their social interconnectedness.

On a more individual level, we, the authors, experienced a growing tension between writing about care while simultaneously navigating university norms which remained stubbornly care-free. For example, when, empowered by my research, I (Marie-Pierre) raised in a previous institution how repeated last-minute changes to teaching timetabling (three times in the space of one week, immediately before and right after term started) were detrimental to carers, staff and students alike, I was told by a female senior manager that bringing up (my) caring responsibilities was ‘unprofessional’. I also learned on that occasion that framing this concern in terms of ‘student satisfaction’, rather than as an equity issue, was likely to lead to a more favourable reception, possibly because it fed into neoliberal ideologies which construct higher education as a marketable commodity for student customers, and feminism and other equity struggles as the handmaidens of new forms of capitalism (Fraser 2013). Another growing realisation came from the fact the academic texts I (Marie-Pierre) wrote on carers seemed rather ineffective in terms of generating interest beyond the small community of researchers engaged in the field. In comparison, the pieces I wrote for a variety of newspapers and policy websites led to a steady stream of highly personal emails from strangers. In contrast with policy and research in this area, which have usually focused on parents, this came from those individuals whose care responsibilities were less supported yet often more challenging in many respects (that is, financial, organisational, emotional) than the parenting of a healthy, abled child (see Moreau & Robertson 2017 & 2019): women and, occasionally, men, caring for a partner, sibling, and/or elderly relative often with an illness or a disability. The sharing of these intimate experiences (including in some cases of the death of the person they cared for) made for some painful reading. I have resisted the ‘datafication’ of these personal stories (see Burke, in this issue), yet three themes clearly emerge: the (painful, exhausting) emotional dimension of care work; the inhospitability of academic cultures (or, in rarer cases, its hospitability, constructed as a cause for celebration); and a sense of validation and being ‘seen’ when reading about the research.

The tensions between writing academically about equity issues and (not) making a difference (in a social justice-informed manner not conveyed by the more neoliberal definition of ‘impact’) led to a sense of discomfort and was the impetus for a first art-based project, supported by the Good Practice Awards program of the Advance HE. With film director Tim Bernard, I co-produced a short feature, *Carers and careers in academia*, involving interviews with academic carers and higher education policy-makers (Moreau & Bernard 2019). Building on the film, a second grant from the Advance HE enabled us (Sally and Marie-Pierre) to develop the comic-based collaborative research discussed in this article. We shared ideas about the research and how the drawings would convey some of the engagement we wanted the project to generate. This led to the identification of the key themes and, for each theme, of related quotes from interviews conducted as part of my (Marie-Pierre) research projects. Our discussions went from the macro, that is, the structure of the drawings and how they would form together an exhibition with a sense of togetherness, to the micro, that is, the drawings, the quotes and their links within each panel, with Sally conceptualising and drawing the images.

The story so far: Disrupting academic norms in the midst of a pandemic

Academic conventions, art-based interpellations

In contrast to the centrality of care work in producing and maintaining our world, care work and carers continue to be marginalised, including in higher education policy and research circles. This also characterises the production of academic texts, which have ‘written out’ care/ers of their narratives. Our work attempts to challenge the prevalence of the figure of the ‘bachelor boy’. Yet we also acknowledge that the written form, and academic writing in particular, represents a site of symbolic violence as a selective process which constructs the social world and, thus, potentially sustains power relationships (Connell 2007). Moreover, our own experiences highlight the limitations of seeking change through academic texts only. Academic texts are often physically or conceptually inaccessible (for example when they are behind a paywall). Likewise, the academic canon reiterates the carefreeness of intellectual thinking, where excellence becomes out of reach for those doing care work, for example through the mobility and full availability imperatives (Henderson & Moreau 2020), and, as such, academic writing can be exclusionary.

At its most basic, arts-based research is the process of employing the tools and processes of art making to gather, analyse, understand, engage with, and/or disseminate data. In other terms,

arts based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. It represents the unfolding and expanding orientation to qualitative social science that draws inspiration, concepts, processes and representation from the arts, broadly defined. (Knowles & Cole 2008, p. 608).

Within the larger umbrella of arts-based research is comics-based research, with which we have engaged in this piece. This is a relatively new form of arts-based work, which has been defined by Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower and Sousanis (2020) and Galman (2021). The comic genre as fundamentally about contiguous images and text, offers certain affordances that are potentially powerful for qualitative work. These include multimodality, the blending of sequential and simultaneous communication, an emphasis on explicit demarcation of creator voice, and what Kuttner et al. (2020) refer to as the work of ‘re-storying’. Re-storying is particularly important to the analyses here. As Kuttner et al. (2020) write in the context of Weaver-Hightower’s 2017 comic piece, *A Father’s Story*, Weaver-Hightower takes apart, and then reassembles, a complex and multilayered story that shifts back and forth from the personal narrative to larger medical conceptual information, ‘using the tools and conventions of comics to piece together a coherent narrative’ (p. 203) offering simultaneous layers of complexity. In this work, we also employed re-storying to tell multiple connected narratives in the context of the larger landscape of policy and practice. Our use of comics-based method creates a layered, interdependent comic narrative that can be read as both a single page as well as a multilayered communication or ‘cross panel meaning making’ (Kuttner et al. 2020, p. 203).

While acknowledging that the arts are not an unproblematic medium either, this research- and art-based collaboration views the arts as method as a powerful tool for conceptualising and understanding. We approach them as a mode of knowledge production that does more than enhance accessibility and engage diverse publics with research topics and stories. Instead, we argue that the arts in general, and comics specifically, enable readers to simultaneously consider the parts and the whole; the contiguous images and words that characterise comic art allow

readers to be challenged by individual carers' stories while also considering the larger socio-cultural context.

The use of comics and other art forms enables us to reach out to minoritised groups because of the multi-layered accessibility of the drawing form compared, say, with the more rigid academic codes. However, it also serves another purpose, which is the engagement of the privileged who, should they want to, are able to live their life without questioning the societal structures which confer them power, including because of the gendered, classed and raced chains of care which enable some to perform the illusory identity of the care-free academic. See, for example, 'Dave', a pseudonym, in Moreau and Robertson (2019) and in the drawings in this article. Engaging with the privileged, in higher education and other spheres, is key to bringing about social change. It is worth noting here that in this sector as in many others, decision-making is mainly in the hands of those who are a close fit to the archetype of the 'bachelor boy'. In the UK, for example, men represent 86 per cent of vice-chancellors, in sharp contrast with the strong numerical presence of women and girls in the higher education population (HESA 2020).

A particular endeavour through this project relates to raising awareness of carers' presence in HE and of the diversity and intersectionalities of their experiences, so as to encourage the development of social, including writing, practices which are equitable to caregivers. The drawing form also has a wholeness to it. Although, like writing, it is selective in terms of what is included and what is left out, the vignette format has a wholeness to it that enables us to 'draw a fuller picture', one where information is contextualised and where the oft left unsaid is made explicit (for example, the fact that the body of the scholar can be drawn, rather than left to the imagination of the reader, and that this body can be marked by gender, class, race etc. in intersectional ways), in contrast with the universal yet masculinist take of many higher education texts which render bodies invisible. The drawn form also appeals to the individual as a whole and encourages a simultaneous intellectual, emotional and at times physical engagement, while the format of the exhibition facilitates communal engagement as the viewers physically present in the space of the exhibition can converse with each other. Indeed, as argued by Vanover and colleagues,

When arts-based practices are used skilfully to produce a provocative work of art, researchers gain the power to strike the imagination and speak directly to the public. A piece of art or performance of "high aesthetic quality has the potential to engage audiences emotionally and communally" (Saldaña, 2018, p. 374). Such is rarely the case with academic journal articles. (Vanover et al. 2021, p. xv)

The arts, especially the comic arts, increase the possibilities and reach of academic knowledge dissemination while not compromising the complexity and nuance of the stories and analyses contained within. In this way comics-based and arts-based research is not only highly effective but also deeply engaging.

Pandemic reflections

Researching carers in academia has never been more timely. We know from a small number of studies that this group represents a significant presence in academia (Mason et al. 2013; NUS 2013; UCU 2017) and we know that care work is a highly gendered activity as it is constructed as ‘women’s work’ (Atkinson 2017). We also know that carers experience a broad range of issues, including in terms of work-life balance, finance and health as well as range of feelings and emotions (Brooks 2014; Hook 2016; Moreau & Kerner 2015; NUS 2009 & 2013; Wainwright & Marandet 2006). It is precisely these affective and emotional components of carers’ experiences which tend to be overseen by policies and research; grappling with this omission is at the centre of this project.

These emotional and affective elements of care came into particularly sharp relief during this project for the simple reason that we did this work during a global pandemic that magnified the costs and stressors of carers’ work. We certainly did not know at the time of starting this project that it would take place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we both enjoy a number of privileges linked, for example, to our classed, raced and geo-political positioning, the US and the UK were particularly affected by the pandemic. In both countries, the pandemic context has been characterised by the emergence of ‘post-truth’ narratives and social movements, and a call for a return to more conservative forms of politics which threaten the rights of minoritised groups (Burke et al. in press). Research also shows that for academics as for other groups, the pandemic has reinforced gender and other inequities, for example, as women have taken on a disproportionate share of home-schooling and of the reproductive work related to it, such as preparing meals, cleaning, etc. (European Commission 2021).

However, maybe more crucially, the ongoing pandemic has suddenly thrown light on the care arrangements which had been rendered invisible by care-free academic and societal norms. While the current situation means that the exhibition of the art work had to be postponed, sharing the art work discussed in this article through online seminars has comforted us in the view that art work ‘speak to the public’ and, in that particular case, can trouble the care-free norms of academia and encourage collective mobilisation, ultimately drawing/writing equity into practice. The newly acquired visibility of care work is a critical moment that needs grasping if we are to embrace the idea of the ‘care-full’ university and to be accompanied by the mobilisation of discourses of care as a set of relationships enabling the production and maintenance of our world rather than a burdensome, individualised commodity. This art- and research-informed collaboration is part of this effort.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Advance HE for funding this project through the Small Grants Award Program and to the participants of the various research projects informing this project.

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