

‘The sand’s going to run out at any minute’: A collaborative autoethnography of class, gender and precarity in academia

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To cite this article:

Rowell, CR & Morris, C 2023, “‘The Sand’s Going to Run Out at Any Minute’: A collaborative autoethnography of class, gender and precarity in academia”, *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 28–46.

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This article contributes to feminist debates that seek to shed light on the politics of the contemporary neoliberal academy, contributing insights into experiences of early career academics on teaching-only contracts. Through collaborative autoethnography it explores configurations and intersections of the temporal with precarity, class and gender. We draw upon experience(s) of navigating academia as early career academics, reflecting on our journeys from doctoral study to and through the academic labour market, from fixed-term precarious contracts through to securing ‘permanent’ full-time academic contracts. We focus on ways in which temporalities have served as a structuring force in our working and personal lives, shaping experiences of navigating academia on both a micro and macro scale. We grapple with themes such as everyday experiences of time, precarious timelines, ‘working against the clock’, ‘staying afloat’ and ‘finding the time’. We further consider way(s) in which our experiences have been further compounded by socio-historical positions, attending to intersections of class and gender given our differing class backgrounds, circumstances, life stage and the timeline of history and biography.

Keywords: class; working-class; gender; neoliberal academia; collaborative autoethnography; precarity; time.

Introduction

‘I feel like time in academia, you always feel like you’ve got this ... I don’t know what it’s called. What’s it called? That time ... You know that thing with the sand in it that you turn over?’ (Charlotte)

‘The sand’s going to run out any minute ... *Time, you know, the years just flash by so quickly* when you’re full-on teaching’ (Charlotte, emphasis added)

‘I know. Well I handed in my PhD in just November, no in June 2018, my Viva in November 2018, handed in my corrections in in like March time, um, and then graduated and, you know, I haven’t published, I haven’t even attempted to take my PhD and to get some publications out of it, and I know that I need to, but *it’s just finding that time*, and like at Christmas, I just wanted a holiday ...’ (Carli)

The aforementioned, brief extract of a conversation between the authors of this paper reveals much about the contemporary landscape of higher education. It speaks of the accelerated nature of time within academia that otherwise operates at a glacial pace (how long do we typically wait to hear back from a job application, or an article that we submitted months ago, or to hear if our fixed term position is going to be extended?) and of pressures and pulls felt by early career academics (ECAs)¹ navigating the uneven, non-linear trajectory from doctoral student to permanent academic position (Wilson et al. 2021). (We use the term ‘early career academic’ to refer to the period of time within eight years of the award of the PhD. We refrain from using the more popular term ‘early career researcher’, recognising that this excludes those who are on teaching-focused contracts within universities.)

To the outside world, academia operates as a ‘dream space’, a place for armchair pondering and luxury pursuits, detached from the ‘real world’ (Read 2018). But for those on the inside, it’s a different story. However, ‘despite the pervasive myths and nostalgia about universities’ (Gill & Donaghue 2016, p.98) contemporary academia is one of rampant acceleration, massification, commodification, casualisation and disposability (Barcan 2013; Gill 2009; Holmwood 2017; Telling 2018). For those on the inside, working in higher education, such environments result in chronic stress, anxiety, exhaustion, imposterism and a culture of overwork among much else (Addison et al. 2022; Breeze 2018; Loveday 2018; Pereira 2019). This is what Gill (2009) has referred to as the hidden injuries of the neoliberal university and whilst it can be argued no university worker is free from the entrapment of neoliberal academia, the hidden injuries that it inflicts are more acutely felt by those most adversely affected by wider societal inequalities of class, gender, race, sexuality, age and (dis)ability (Loveday 2016; Read & Leathwood 2018). There are further impacts and implications for those at the start of their academic journeys and those on precarious contracts which can hinder career progression (Courtois & O’Keefe 2015; Ivancheva & O’Flynn 2016). Moreover, academics who are employed on temporary teaching-focused contracts, especially in the long-term, represent a lacuna in the scholarly literature and the effects of neoliberal academia upon them remain under-explored.

¹ We use the term ‘early career academic’ to refers to the period of time within eight years of the award of the PhD. We refrain from using the more popular term ‘early career researcher’ recognising that this excludes those who are on teaching focused contracts within universities.

It is against this backdrop that this article has three interlinked aims: firstly, it seeks to foster and contribute to a body of feminist literature that sheds light on the politics of the contemporary neoliberal academy; secondly it moves the focus to an under-researched group, those employed on teaching-focused contracts; finally, it explores the temporal in relation to class, gender and precarity. In doing so, we begin by considering classed and gendered dimensions of time and precarity within neoliberal academia, before discussing our empirical research, that of collaborative autoethnography (comprising a trio of methods). Based on this data we then discuss ways in which academic time-space, and our classed and gendered experiences of this time-space, have served as structuring forces in our working and personal lives, shaping our lived experiences of navigating academia. We discuss ways in which our gendered, classed biographies resist simplistic linear notions (Clegg 2010; Puwar 2004) of what it means to be and become academic in the context of neoliberal academia, in an era which has seen a separation of teaching and research. In particular we resist the notion that ‘ideal academia’ (Bourdieu 1988) means adopting disembodied, detached, rational, mobile subjectivities motivated solely by economic rationalities, alongside neat compartmentalisations of ‘work and life’ and lives which follow decontextualised career timelines. Rather, we foreground relationality, care and interdependence, alongside the messiness and complexity of careers which intertwine with and are embedded in everyday experiences. Drawing on theories of time, we hope to interrupt neat categorisations and compartmentalisations and problematise classed and gendered assumptions about who is academic and the ‘right ways’ to do academia. We offer specific insights into lived experiences of those cast in ‘teaching-only’ roles which, in intersection with precarity and exacerbation of time pressures, render academic careers unsustainable, especially for those already affected by inequalities. While we primarily refer to precarity in relation to job insecurity here, we recognise the broader dimensions of social precarity (Butler 2009) and its reach into context-specific ‘microspaces’ (Ettlinger 2007) and temporalities of everyday lives. Such microspaces and moments contain memories, thoughts, feelings and interactions linked to positionalities and situated within a specific historical milieu.

Before reviewing the literature, we wish to reflect on the politics of production inherent in writing this article. We do not wish to deny or downplay our privileges for we are privileged in so many ways. We were born in the Global North and are English-speaking therefore possessing the privileges this entails in relation to the geopolitical *and* global academic hierarchies of knowledge production (Bhambra 2021; Connell 2011; Spivak 1988). We are both white, cis-gendered, have led heterosexual lives and have not had to contend with operating on the margins of academia along these lines. Moreover, we are now employed on continuing contracts² (albeit teaching-focused, a theme threaded throughout this paper) within UK (non-Russell Group) universities. (We use the term ‘continuing’ rather than permanent as a political commitment to recognise that, within neoliberal academia, nothing is permanent and permanency is not guaranteed.) Indeed, we may be read by some as being figures of achievement having ‘successfully’ navigated the pipeline from doctoral student to full academic. Yet, ‘success’, ‘achievement’ or its associated synonyms are seldom sentiments that we read in our work given the ever demanding, though self-nominated (if we are to ‘succeed’ in academia) pressures upon our time. Even writing this article Carli was sure we would have to withdraw, owing to competing work commitments (but was kindly granted an extension after Charlotte gave her the confidence to ‘keep calm and carry-on writing’). We have voluntarily taken time out of our annual leave to work on this article and we have both felt, in working on this ‘output’, the squeezing of time and space. Stealing a few hours here and a few moments there, finding

² We use the term ‘continuing’ rather than permanent as a political commitment to recognise that, within neoliberal academia, nothing is permanent and permanency is not guaranteed.

ourselves writing on planes, and at times when panic struck, into the early hours of the morning. Academic literature highlights the challenges academics face in prioritising writing (Murray 2013; Murray & Newton 2009), as a result of workplace demands and roles which render academic writing as less urgent (MacLeod et al. 2012), especially so when on teaching-focused contracts. Our own experience of writing this article was marked by disjuncture and spatial precarity. It was one of starts and stops, neither here nor there, as we ‘stole’ time increasingly from our personal lives and found the physical space to write wherever we could. An otherwise relaxing hour in the departure hall browsing duty free turned into a rapid one-hour intense writing session, before closing the laptop to board the plane, only to resume writing as everyone else spent their time enjoying the onboard flight entertainment. This article now turns to provide an overview of literature in the field, situated within contemporary neoliberal academia.

Literature

Neoliberalism in higher education

In recent decades, the higher education landscape has been subject to intense radical reforms, both nationally and globally (Deem 1998; Jones & Maguire 2021; Holmwood 2014). Within England (our context), it has shifted from ‘the extension of a social right to education’ (Holmwood 2014, p. 62) to market ideologies with neoliberal reforms transforming its logics. Transitioning from a public good, to an individual private choice, the ‘reward’ of higher education is positioned as being of sole benefit to the individual rather than society at large (p. 62). This discourse is used to justify the shifting of the funding of higher education from the public purse to a private one consequently subjecting higher education to mass marketisation and commodification. In the contemporary marketised landscape of higher education, universities are pitted against one another in the fight to secure student numbers (Brown 2011). Within universities, even the most foundational of academic pursuits, the formation of academic knowledge, which ‘can feel like the most immaterial and intangible of constructions’ (Pereira 2022, p. 983) is now subject to increasingly neoliberal regimes as academics clamber for ever diminishing funding and are having to justify their intellectual pursuits through discourses of wider societal ‘impact’. As a direct result of the imposition of neoliberalism, the nuance of academic life in all its forms has been conflated to mere measures and metrics (research and teaching ‘excellence’; impact factors; university world and national rankings, student satisfaction surveys and monitoring of graduate outcomes) as Foucauldian ‘technologies of power’ and surveillance pervade academic life (1977).

There exists a strong body of feminist literature highlighting the impact of neoliberal academia (Breeze et al. 2019; Gill 2017; Pereira 2019; Taylor & Lahad 2019), or what Gill and Donaghue rightly refers to as the ‘deep crisis affecting universities’ (Gill & Donaghue 2016, p. 91). In academia, turning the scholarly gaze back around on itself has highlighted ways in which neoliberalism shapes, makes and pervades the everyday lives of scholars – aspiring, established or otherwise – and of the lived realities of the *less glamorous* side of neoliberal academia (Taylor & Breeze 2020; Breeze et al. 2019; Pereira 2019). Rampant commodification, casualisation and competition, alongside the rise of audit culture (among much else) has resulted in a contemporary academic labour market characterised by precarity and disposability on a structural level, and feelings of insecurity and anxiety on an individual one (Loveday 2018; Gill 2009; Gill & Donaghue 2016; Wilson et al. 2021) for those working as labourers in the ‘knowledge factory’ (Tokarczyk & Fay 1993). The adoption of this specific business model has led to an increasing separation of teaching and research, hence the creation of ‘teaching-only’ lectureships and career pathways in academia which can also be read as highly gendered and classed, reinforcing a hierarchical ‘two-tier’ system (Bozzon et al. 2019).

Time

A focus on time offers insights into ways in which neoliberal academia has become commodified, accelerated and intensified (Gill 2009; Ylijoki 2013), with demands to be constantly ‘flexible’ (Bunn et al. 2018) and productive having profound impacts on staff wellbeing (Gill 2009). This is reflected in the accounts here and it is important to consider the specific implications for precariously employed academics, particularly those experiencing wider societal inequalities. Leathwood and Read (2020) have identified impacts of ‘just in time’ modalities casualised staff often operate within, not always knowing until the last minute if they will be teaching or what they will be teaching, and prevented from offering consistent support and continuity for their students. The assumption underpinning such expectations is of a young, mobile, able-bodied academic unencumbered by caring and domestic responsibilities which, we suggest, is far from the case given the overrepresentation of women, Black and minoritised staff in the casualised workforce (UCU 2019). In the UK context, there is a gender gap in relation to academic mobility (EU Commission 2016), reflecting wider gender inequalities. Extended periods spent working on temporary contracts, which can continue for decades, mean that mature women can be misread and infantilised as ‘early career’ or less experienced (Vantansever 2020).

Time is often viewed as neutral, abstract and constant, however theorists have drawn attention to gendered and classed aspects: Adams (2002, 2003) has theorised the imposition of western ‘clock-time’ through industrialisation, enforcing the notion that ‘time is money’. This has entailed obscuration and devaluation of caring and domestic labour, which does not fit neatly into carefully measured, quantifiable regimes and which is primarily undertaken by women. Activities cast as ‘women’s work’ frequently occupy ‘shadowlands’, outside recognised, legitimised labour and values epitomised by *homo economicus* (rational economic man). Rather than being understood as ‘abstract, decontextualised and de-temporalised’ (Adams 2003, p. 67) then, understanding time as gendered and classed, means attending to relationality, to embodied caring interdependencies embedded within communities which are essential to survival. Clegg (2010) has noted reductive neoliberal constructions of the future which require continual self-development and self-surveillance on the part of individuals, yet her research highlighted that not all individuals share this orientation and it can inhibit more ethical care for the future.

This devaluation of care and interdependent ways of being which do not fit neatly into abstract, linear conceptions of time, carries over into the academy and has been theorised as ‘carelessness’ (Lynch 2010) with a narrow set of criteria attached to what (or who) are deemed ‘productive’ and which activities are accorded recognition, prestige and viewed as career-building (Bunn et al. 2018). O’Keefe and Courtois (2019) noted how women on precarious contracts tend to be delegated the majority of ‘academic housework’ (teaching, pastoral care, administration). This is especially pertinent when considering staff on teaching-only contracts who may occupy academic ‘shadowlands’ (Adams 2002) – providing an invisibilised service rather than creators of knowledge in their own right. Assumptions of autonomous, ‘flexible’, freely floating, financially privileged mobile entrepreneurial subjectivities which characterise contemporary ‘ideal academia’ are highly gendered and classed, belying interdependencies, relationality, embeddedness and the need for belonging and proximity which shape the narratives shared here. Nevertheless, we are aware of the problematics of reproducing (often heteronormative) assumptions and stereotypes surrounding gendered and classed identities in relation to im/mobility dichotomies (Sautier 2021). We concur with Leathwood and Read (2020) who argue the need to recognise that time – ‘the way it is lived, experienced and (re)constructed through our location, positionality and experience – is gendered, classed and racialised and tied to unequal power relations and socio-cultural differences’ (p. 914).

Precarity and inequalities

Continuing gendered and classed inequities in the academy are underpinned by patriarchal, elitist and racist value structures despite a surface rhetoric of equality and diversity (Ahmed 2012). Women, single parents, mature, disabled, working-class, sexual and gender minority, racialised and migrant academics are particularly subject to academic marginalisation (Amsler & Motta 2017; Ivancheva et al. 2019; Lörz & Mühleck 2018). However, much literature on gender equality in the academy has tended to focus on the higher ranks (O’Keefe & Courtois 2019; Thwaites & Pressland 2017). A developing body of literature exploring gender in relation to academic precarity is drawing out gendered, classed and racialised effects including lack of dependable income, impacts on career progression and affective consequences for self-esteem and professional identity in light of ongoing ‘micro’ inequities of marginalisation in everyday lives (Courtois & O’Keefe 2015; Ivancheva et al. 2019; Murgia & Poggio 2018; Read & Leathwood 2020; Ylijoki 2010).

Women tend to do the most exploitative, least secure work and tend to be channelled into part-time positions, become trapped in roles which comprise ‘dead-end jobs’ (Zbyszawska 2017), are debarred from promotional opportunities (Courtois & O’Keefe 2015) and often have less opportunities and resources than their male counterparts (Zheng 2018). Exploitation of casualised staff means that they serve the advancement of (usually privileged male) ‘research stars’ (Smyth 2017), ‘regardless of the impact that this might have for their own research output and advancement potential’ (Zbyszawska 2017, p. 949). Nevertheless, casualised workers can experience ambivalence due to the construction of academia as a ‘dream job’ (Murgio & Poggia 2019) and often feel ‘grateful’ to have any work at all (Loveday 2018).

Investigating precarious timelines

This paper derives from a wider project focusing on our experiences as ECAs on teaching-only temporary contracts (at the time of this research) who found ourselves ‘competing’ for the same academic job. The research project accompanied us as we journeyed from fixed-term contracts to continuing full-time academic posts thus ‘securing’ our institutional future. It is against this backdrop that the project sought to explore everyday lived realities of navigating academia as ECAs, attending to class and gender. In doing so, we drew upon collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al. 2012) with data collected over the course of 2020, beginning with a series of face-to-face methods before the pandemic, then shifting online in light of the national lockdown. Our qualitative toolkit comprised a trio of unstructured qualitative methods of co-produced empirical material through: (a) a co-walking interview; (b) a post co-walking interview; and (c) a follow up online zoom co-interview. In total, just under five hours of interview ‘talk’ was captured, recorded and transcribed verbatim resulting in 27,960 words.

Collaborative autoethnography (Chang 2013; Chang et al. 2016) is a way of drawing upon our personal experiences as an outlet of social critique. Where autoethnography seeks to ‘expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher’s personal experience’ (Chang 2013, p. 108), collaborative autoethnography involves more than one researcher to consider multiple layers of intersubjectivities. By drawing upon collaborative autoethnography, a method that is ‘simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic’ (Chang et al. 2013, p. 17) we were able to sharpen our interpretation(s) and assist one another in making the familiar strange when exploring the way in which class and gender have served as structuring forces in our experiences of precarity in academia. Autoethnographic methods have been critiqued, as Pearce (2020) indicates, for being intellectually lazy, narcissist and self-pitying given that many centre personal anguish and are thus written off as ‘me-search’ (Stewart 2017, p. 301). We

contest such critiques and, echoing Gill, question how any communication that is in any way, however slightly, critical of the conditions of the contemporary university ‘remains hearable as a »moan«, as an expression of complaint or unhappiness, rather than being formulated as an analysis or a (political) demand for change’ (Gill 2016, p. 41).

Our methods were underpinned by the feminist priority of experiential, situated ways of ‘knowing’, alongside the feminist ethic of reciprocity (Harding 1997; Letherby 2003). Throughout our collaborative autoethnography we deployed unstructured interviews to promote dialogical exchange, allowing for emotional demands of the research and space for reflection and exploration (Rizvi 2019). Thus, our ‘co’ approach to data collection, whereby we both were the topic of sociological exploration and thus both ‘asked’ the questions and both ‘responded’ *felt* like more a conversation based on existing friendship and sisterhood (Oakley 1981). Thus, ‘data collection’ was characterised by a two-way flow of experiential knowledge rather than the mechanical extraction of ‘data’ or strict adherence to methodological ‘how to’ blueprint. We acknowledge the complexity of the interactional politics of our encounters and of the shifting of power (Oakley 2016) alongside differences between us, most notably in relation to our class, age and (dis)ability which have shaped our respective findings and discussions. That said, we do not view any of our co-methods as being too subjective or staged but rather as interactional and interpersonal events whereby as co-researchers, co-authors and friends we have *jointly* negotiated, navigated and constructed meaning. Data analysis occurred collaboratively and intuitively as with much collaborative autoethnography (Chang 2013; Muncey 2010). As we sought to make sense of the emergent themes and observations we shared our analytical notes with one another over the course of the research interweaving our analysis. We corresponded and met several times to reflect on emerging findings; this iterative process finally resulting in the identification of broad themes, situated within our biographies, including that of ‘time’. Alongside cross-cutting themes we also sought to holistically preserve the narrative dimensions of this data and to situate our storied lived experiences within a wider socio-cultural context (Plummer 2000).

In early 2020 both authors partook in a walking interview, drawing on walking as a means of method (Moles 2008) in order to capture, compare and construct our subjective experiences of navigating academia. Walking as method was motivated by the desire to explore what everyday spaces and places of higher education can reveal about classed and gendered trajectories of journeying to and through academia (given education’s historical classed and gendered exclusions). It was also in part prompted by our desire to experience the university space in different ways than we normally would in a typical workday, one of leisurely reflection and exchange rather than characterised by task driven urgency and the ever-ticking time of the hourglass of the working day. We engaged in the act of ‘bimbling’, the act of wandering aimlessly ‘through a co-ingredient environment, which can be harnessed to prompt therefore unstated or unrecalled knowledge’ (Moles 2008, 4.3). The following excerpt, taken seconds after we pressed record and whilst we were still orientating ourselves with the built environment, led to a rich conversation about the competitive nature of academia, and of competing against your friends. It reveals how quickly bimbling can elicit insights that would otherwise go unstated:

Author: I’m trying to think, where should we go from here in terms of, I guess because you did your PhD here the campus probably has more like, meaning in terms of, I imagine, like different buildings when you walk past that spark different things, whereas to me not every building has that, if that makes sense?

Author: Well, kind of. There must be a few... I feel we should be democratic, and we should each pick say three locations each to have a conversation in, and we'll take it in turns to maybe ask each other questions?

Then, just as we were about to continue bimbbling, a memory of Carli's is invoked:

Carli: *I think that one of my things is right here, like physically here, because this is where I obviously sat, was waiting, and then turned round and saw you coming, and then it was the realisation of like "Oh shit! I knew academia was small but perhaps not this small."* And it's like the whole of academia pits you against your friends and your colleagues and your peers. I think that was the moment of like, just, sort of I don't know how I felt, I just felt like, I guess it was just that realisation of "How could I not have thought that there would be somebody that I would know being interviewed for the same position?"

Our positionalities served as potential points of 'connection', however, there were also differences that characterised our experiences of navigating academia. Both of us, at the time of fieldwork, defined ourselves as early career academics (ECAs), Carli had completed her PhD one year prior to the time of fieldwork (2018) and Charlotte in 2014. We use the term 'early career academics' rather than *researchers*, having both worked in 'teaching-only' positions which place constraints on the ability to undertake research-related activities (through exclusion from the research excellence framework, researcher training and support, ability to contribute to funding bids and lack of time for research activities) and so it feels more inclusive. We are conscious of the ambiguity of the term 'early career' in an era where academics can remain on short-term contracts for decades, building up experience yet without the status this might afford colleagues on 'permanent' contracts (Morris et al. 2022; O'Keefe & Courtois 2015; Vantansever 2020). Neither of us had held continuing academic positions prior to this, though we both had experiences of working within temporary teaching and research roles. Charlotte had done their PhD and taught on a series of fractional, hourly paid and fixed-term contracts across several institutions for over 15 years and Carli had worked as an Associate Tutor and Teaching Fellow during the final year of her PhD and as an Economic and Social Research Council Global Challenges Research Fund (ESRC GCRF) Postdoc. Similarly, although not the focus of this article, neither of us possess the 'able body' that academia demands, with Carli having received a diagnosis of endometriosis in 2018, followed by two operations since. Similarly, Charlotte manages chronic health conditions, making certain everyday tasks challenging; combined with working in precarious academic roles, this meant periods where her wellbeing was affected.

With regards to differences, Carli identified as coming from a working-class background with no history of higher education participation in her family or among close friends (who she did not meet prior to non-compulsory education). Charlotte followed a non-traditional route through education and academia (leaving education early then returning later), left school early and balanced part-time study with caring and work responsibilities. Her transition into academia was affected by hidden disabilities, age (as a mature returner to higher education), and financial and health challenges, exacerbated by long-term precarity. Secondly, being of different ages means we do not share the same socio-political location. Carli is, to echo Allen (2014), one of 'Blair's children' and has experienced the institutionalisation of the socio-political rhetoric of aspiration and education within school practices and cultures. Charlotte was considered an 'under-achiever' and left school at 16 to work before returning to education later. For middle-class

young women there was pressure to enter a ‘respectable’ career, to marry respectably (Skeggs 1997) and follow a neatly delineated life trajectory. Both authors experienced ‘not fitting’ with such expectations of ‘linear time’ (Adam 1995), accompanied by its classed, gendered, able-bodied ideals, yet embarked on precarious journeys into and through academia.

Working-class and working against the clock

The notion that academics are privileged above all others, with “cushy” tenured positions, has a firm hold in the popular imagination. (Gill & Donaghue 2018, p. 92)

As a result of the proliferation of academic capitalism, short-termism has proliferated as a work model and it is against this backdrop that Read and Leathwood (2018) write of the uncertainty and the impossibility of knowing what one’s professional futures hold for ECAs and established academics alike. This uncertainty, the impossibility of knowing what our futures entailed was a key narrative pervading our exchanges. Whilst we both spoke of our enjoyment and passion for our work; our accounts were littered with anxieties and fears about our professional futures which in turn reveal much about the classed and gendered aspects of navigating precarity against a ticking time clock in contemporary academia. Precarity served to intensify the dominance of ‘clock-time’ (Adam 2002) at the level of everyday lives, academic semesters and years, with end-of-contract and project deadlines continually on the horizon amid uncertain futures. We spoke at length about experiences of navigating multiple fixed-term contracts and of the constant need to plan for *the next academic job* which further intensified our work. For Carli, the juggling of fixed-term positions started even before the completion of the PhD, as funding came to an end before the completion of her PhD, due to then caring commitments. Reflecting on the experience of starting one-year teaching fellowship at the start of her final year of her PhD, Carli describes the constant feeling of needing to plan ‘[for] the next move or what comes after’:

Although I started in [institution] it was very much: “Right, I need to find something for the year that follows.” I think because of me there’s always been this underlying fear that I would not get a job out of it [the PhD] because I know how congested the labour market is in some way and they just expect so much from you, um, so for me as soon as I got to [institution] it was almost about: “Right OK *there’s not even a chance to breathe you need to start planning for your next move or what comes after ...* (Carli)

Later in the interview, Carli reflects on her experience of embarking on a fixed-term, three-year lectureship (which she had recently begun at the time of the interview):

So, I have got this three-year contract, and I’m very grateful for it, but at the same time, as soon as you start those three years, time is ticking, and it’s like, you’ve got to do everything that this job requires of you. Plus, everything else in order to build your CV and yourself up to be able to be, you know, competitive for the next time.

Evident here is Carli’s necessary need to think ahead and plan for the next academic job, or rather, the job search, since applying for an academic job does not equate to an interview, much less a job offer, and of the ticking clock of her fixed-term contract. Planning for and preparing oneself for the academic job market for Carli took the form of what we might refer to as ‘hyper work’, a defining feature of navigating contemporary academia in the lives of other working-

class ECAs (Wilson et al. 2021). In their study of Australian job advertisements in order to answer the mysterious question that is ‘what do academic employers really want from the PhD now?’ Pitt and Mewburn (2016, p. 88) speak of the so-called, ‘new academic’: ‘A multi-talented, always ready and available worker that we have started to label the “academic super-hero”, capable of being everything to everyone’ (p. 99). In the eyes of the university, being everything to everyone entails (to name just a few): conforming to university strategic priorities, winning research bids, authoring world-class publications, designing and learning innovative courses, delivering excellent pastoral care, developing an ‘impact’ agenda and emerging as future leaders within one’s respective field (among much else). Given the multiple forms of expertise and experience one needs to evidence on the academic CV it is of no surprise that despite being *at the start* of her three-year fixed-term contract she still spoke of the *urgent need* to build a CV in addition to carrying out her day job (a teaching-focused lectureship). The implication is that it is not enough for Carli to simply do her day job *and do it well*, but that, in order to survive against the ticking clock of academia, there is a need for her to go beyond that if she is to progress and secure permanency. Interestingly, planning for the next academic job was never spoken about through discourses of ‘progression’ and ‘promotion’; absent from Carli’s narrative was a sense of entitlement. Instead, feelings of fear and survival within an already congested academic labour market underpinned this narrative. There was seldom any explicit talk of ‘climbing the academic career ladder’ but instead, the notion of ‘staying afloat’ was echoed in the sentiments expressed throughout these exchanges.

For Carli, the *need* to ‘succeed’ within academia, which was understood at the time, for her, as achieving a permanent position, was deeply bound up in her working-class positioning. As Reay notes, ‘working-class relationships to education have always been deeply problematic and emotionally charged, inscribing academic failure rather than success’ (2001 p. 333). Academic failure *had* been a defining feature of Carli’s educational trajectory prior to discovering sociology at A-level³. Primary school was marked by memories of being placed in what was termed as a ‘special needs’ class, frequently being positioned at the bottom of the weekly spelling test chart followed by attendance at a ‘special measures’ secondary school and all that it entailed. Carli’s experience of education was characterised by fear; it was envisaged as something to get through, something to survive, rather than thrive in. These same feelings of fear, inadequacy and survival that underpinned Carli’s earlier experiences of education lingered on, matching her orientation to the academic labour market. There was a constant fear of not succeeding within academia; the fear of not being able to secure a permanent job underpinned every facet of her PhD and post-PhD journey. This is of no surprise given that working-class academic habituses are rarely infused with feelings of self-confidence and entitlement, but rather insecurity and ambivalence (Reay 2018).

For those working-class persons who find themselves ‘succeeding’ in education, navigating the post-doctoral academic labour market becomes yet *another* educational hurdle which they have to overcome. The need to ‘succeed’ within academia, the need to ‘succeed’ in navigating the precarious labour market for Carli was fuelled not least by the fact that a period of ‘non-work’ and thus loss of income was inconceivable but also further fuelled by the fact that, as a working-class person, pursuing education is bound up with the expectation that doing so will pay off, literally. From the moment you embark on a PhD you are constantly asked by your friends and family ‘have you got a job yet?’ (Rowell & Walter 2022). After all, how do you explain to your working-class community that after investing that much in your education, after spending that

³ A leaving qualification following college or sixth form in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

long studying (when you didn't have to), that in the end, 'nothing', by way of materiality, came of it?

These findings broadly reflect ways in which time is commodified (Adam 2002, 2003) and seen as an investment; this is especially pertinent where resources are under pressure in a context of austerity, underpinning the classed dimensions of time. They speak of the neoliberal milieu and accompanying pressures to 'succeed' alongside the intensification of academic labour and, above all, an internalised need to be constantly 'productive' and engaged in self-development (Adam 2003; Bunn et al. 2018; Clegg 2010). Feelings of shame and fear of being cast as a failure are exacerbated in relation to classed and gendered positionalities. For both authors, academic precarity often involves existing in an ongoing state of fear – needing to survive in the moment, always desperately striving to keep the current contract and secure the next one while simultaneously trying to work towards a future which it is impossible to predict (Read & Leathwood 2018). As Clegg (2010) observes, 'staying put' is not an option within a neoliberal milieu, rather there is an individualised imperative for continued upskilling, mobility and projection into the future.

Precarious timelines: Non-linear journeys to becoming an academic

Charlotte similarly feared that the 'investment', not just financially, but in terms of time, emotions and wellbeing, in belatedly pursuing academia would not come to fruition. While at the time embarking on academic work had seemed exhilarating, and also a 'second chance' to 'make something of myself', in retrospect it seemed that returning to education and following an academic pathway had been highly risky (Reay 2003). Juggling being a single working mother of three with studies (Hinton-Smith 2012), managing disabilities and working across multiple short-term contracts was perceived as a necessary 'sacrifice' in order to achieve security. Opportunities to undertake paid research and teaching alongside her PhD felt like a promising start, however with rapidly diminishing long-term positions, 'staying afloat' and continuing on this path became fraught. The journey of finding work that was fulfilling and provided a sense of vocation became overshadowed by the realities of narrowing opportunities. However, as challenging as it was to continue, it became increasingly difficult to envisage leaving. Spending such a long period of time working and studying in academia, alongside becoming older and experiencing health challenges, entailed a perceived shift to becoming 'unemployable', far from neoliberal requirements for social mobility (Clegg 2010).

[Not getting a job] was just not an option, for so many reasons, but the huge investment of me and my children, and going through the PhD as a single mum, and having to make sacrifices, there was all of that, and the joy that I find in academic work that I can't find in other spheres of life, and there was the journey that I've been on of discovering "This is what I want to do" and it means so much to be able to do that, and then for me, 'cos I'd worked in university for a long time, it's kind of "I've invested fifteen years in this, I have all of these skills and experience, and where am I going to use them?"

An imagined linear trajectory of an academic career, moving neatly from undergraduate to postgraduate to a PhD, possibly doing a 'post-doc' and then as a young academic moving into a permanent position was far removed from a reality which was further complicated by caring responsibilities. Increasingly, international mobility has become a requirement for successful entry into academia (Sautier 2021). However, Charlotte's main priority was being there for her children, supporting them through their education and remaining local as they grew up in a

climate of austerity where job and housing security is difficult to obtain. Moving to another location was impractical and so she was dependent on local universities for whatever work was available. A part-time PhD and needing to take time out for financial, family and health reasons was disadvantageous career-wise, reflecting academic 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010) and devaluation of non-productive uses of time (Adam 2002). The longer this period continued, the more chaotic and 'messy' her CV looked. It became difficult to find a coherent career narrative to share through applications and interviews and, despite her experience, she felt less competitive than those who had followed a more direct route. Rather than following a neat career progression, Charlotte might work at several jobs at different grades at any one time. There was never guaranteed continued employment with opportunities usually only arising at the 'last minute' (Leathwood & Read 2020) and so there was little choice or control over what work to take, accompanied by the humiliation of having to 'beg' for work each semester. Nevertheless, there was always a sense of being extremely fortunate (Loveday 2018) to be able to remain in work, 'stay afloat' and undertake labour which was meaningful.

Time was experienced as gendered and classed in multiple ways which interlink with and are exacerbated by precarity. While there was ostensibly the option of leaving academia, it was not seen as viable with the need to financially support families, maintain livelihoods and provide care. This links to Adam's (2002) notion of 'shadowlands' whereby only labour recognised as economically 'productive' is valued. It reflects the 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010) of neoliberal academia which fails to recognise care and interdependencies, assuming an autonomous, mobile entrepreneurial subject. Both authors were conscious of a spectre of failure attached to investments of time for which a 'return' is expected. The ultimate fear of being unemployed and resultant shame is exacerbated in a period of neoliberal austerity with high levels of stigma attached to those perceived as 'unproductive'. For both middle and working-class people, in different ways, the loss of 'respectability' (Skeggs 1997) and status could potentially have profound impacts on self-esteem and identity, especially in such a highly pressurised, competitive environment, with the constant need to prove ourselves in order to stay in work and apply for suitable roles. There was a very real and urgent need to maintain livelihoods and reach some level of financial stability. This will be exacerbated for those currently struggling with precarity in a UK cost-of-living crisis and the implications are housing insecurity alongside energy and food poverty, likely to impact most on working-class and minoritised women and those with caring responsibilities. Age and health concerns were further factors which heightened fears of running out of time and working 'against time' in order to 'stay afloat'. Combined material, cultural, relational and emotional factors and our gendered, class positionalities left us feeling as though we had to 'be everything for everyone'; we discussed pressures to 'tick the right boxes', reflective of multiple demands inherent within a broad instrumentalisation of academic work (Ylijoki 2013) alongside particularly exploitative conditions for casualised staff. Our shared sense of a 'never ending list' denotes temporal precarity and the impossibility of meeting ever-expanding job and career requirements yet institutional under-resourcing, support and adequate time-space for precarious ECAs (Leathwood & Read 2020).

Conclusion

Our use of collaborative autoethnography has allowed us to explore configurations and intersections of the temporal with class, gender and precarity and ways in which they work to structure our conditions. This article has provided a lens through which we have been able to cast light upon the complexity of time within neoliberal academia, and of its deeply contextual, classed and gendered nature. The contemporary demands of neoliberal academia have created a landscape whereby precarious, ECAs constantly find themselves working against time to

achieve ‘success’ or, at the very minimum, a ‘decent’ contract. We cast light upon the politics of contemporary neoliberal academia, moving the focus to an under-researched group – those employed on teaching-focused contracts. We have reflected on how class and gender shape experiences of time, reflecting upon our journeys from doctoral study to and through the academic labour market. We have discussed our experiences of navigating precarity, of the need to ‘stay afloat’ and to work ‘against the clock’; Adam’s (2002) notion of ‘clock-time’ is rendered even more pertinent in relation to precarity. The need to ‘stay afloat’, to work ‘against the clock’ and thus the motivation to ‘succeed’ within academia was in part, motivated by *the need* to prove the worth of the choice to pursue doctoral study to ourselves and to our family and friends who did not choose to pursue higher education (Carli) and as a result of the need to provide for one’s family (Charlotte) respectively. We have explored ways in which ‘clock-time’ (Adam, 2002) has served as structuring forces in our working and personal lives, shaping our experiences of navigating academia on both a micro and macro scale. Casualised academics are particularly subject to intensification of academic labour and must also be continually engaged in finding the next contract; they are bound by both necessity and a neoliberal imperative for constant self-development and investment in the future (Clegg 2010). Yet complex, embodied, situated realities of interdependent lives render adopting ideal entrepreneurial, mobile subjectivities impossible. A two-tier academic system reinforces classed, gendered and racialised inequities, reproducing ‘shadowlands’ of time and space (Adam 2002, 2003) wherein certain bodies and activities are devalued and under-resourced. Our paper therefore highlights the need for research to focus on the impact of neoliberal academia and all that it entails, including for those on teaching-focused contracts. The wealth of evidence strongly indicates the unsustainability and inequity of this system; our work contributes to this and further suggests that narratives proposing that temporarily employed academics can simply ‘choose’ to leave tend to individualise what are structurally imposed conditions, casting staff as ‘non-productive disposables’ and further entrenching inequalities.

In drawing this article to a conclusion, we wish to return to our earlier discussion regarding the formation of this article. As articulated above, the production of this article is the ‘output’ of a series of ‘micro moments’ which speak to just one aspect of the precariousness of higher education beyond the insecurity of a job contract. It highlights the temporal regimes of higher education, the fluidity of academic time as having no boundaries (Ylijoki 2013) and the spatial liquidity and precariousness of this aspect of academic work. Far from the image of the ‘sociological flaneur’, space and time was not something we could approach at a strolling pace. Neither was this article the product of a creative process that derived from the fixed location of the office high up in the ‘ivory towers’ of academe (both of us share university offices and so peace and quiet is not guaranteed) and thus the space to think. The aforementioned ‘micro moments’ serve as ways in which academic time-space spills over into our personal lives, of academic homelessness despite our continuing contracts, and of the impossibility of clocking in and out of the so-called knowledge factory. Such experiences often elicit feelings of academic fraudulence and imposterism (Morris et al. 2022), feelings that stand in juxtaposition to what we are frequently told about ourselves from our fellow sociological sisters:

“You are really career goals.”

“You achieved so much, so so quickly when you got your PhD.”

“Not that many people would try and do a PhD while raising three children on their own!”

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