

Radical disruptions of a care-less masculinised imaginary of academic identities: Strict divisions of research and organisational labour in higher education

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Jane Gilbert (2022) writing about stories of 'science as saving the world' urges us to (re) conceptualise science-as-we-know-it in order to radically disrupt the dualistic and care-less system of thinking that has helped to cause the problem in the first instance. In this paper, I conduct a critical feminist scrutiny of care relations and equity amid the rapidly changing identities of academics in higher education. Gilbert recommends using three levels of reading drawn from the theorisations of Irigaray (1987). In the first level, a masculinist reading of the problem is conducted. In the second level, the problem is scrutinised from the past perspective of the cultural historical context. Finally, in the third level, the topic is interrogated using a 'negative' or 'female' reading seeking to disrupt the current framing, to offer a critique of the underpinning assumptions and practices and to regenerate transformative possibilities and care-full academic norms. The study is timely, given the increasing body of research showing the gendered nature of the social organisation of academic life, the increasing number of women academics and minorities unfairly tasked with 'academic housekeeping', and at a time when UNESCO and others are calling for a new social contract for humanising education for care, justice and equity.

Keywords: *equity; care; justice; academic identities; higher education; gendered nature of the social organisation of academic life; critical and feminist scrutiny; Irigaray*

Introduction

In this article, I critically scrutinise ‘equity’ in contemporary higher education from the perspective of the multiplicity of care relations that are deeply embedded in all aspects of academic life. I draw from the definition of care proposed by Tronto (2009) as the ‘the set of activities by which we act to organise our world, so that we can live it in the best way possible’ (p. 14), and our understandings of how care is cheapened by a neoliberal imaginary focused on a hierarchical and patriarchal system of high performance management in higher education (Lynch & Crean 2019).

I draw from the definition of equity proposed by Lynch and Baker (2005) as ‘equality of condition’ that goes beyond the more traditional definition of ‘equality of opportunity’, inclusive of access and participation. While inclusive of the latter, Lynch and Baker (2005) propose ‘equality of condition’ as a holistic and integrated four-dimensional model of equity in education that rests on the economic, socio-cultural, political and affective dimensions found in society. The four dimensions are inclusive of the following: (1) the affective dimension is concerned with the love labour and care relations involved in the building of trust and social solidarity; (2) the resource dimension is concerned with the material and social resources needed to enable and empower all in a higher education setting; (3) the political dimension is concerned with taking differential power relations and politics into account and working in ways that lower power through dialogue for more egalitarian relations suited to a pluralist democratic society; (4) the socio-cultural dimension is concerned with foregrounding the intersectional dimension of respect, appreciation and recognition of difference (diversity). Lynch and Baker remind us of the necessary struggle involved in working with this view of equity, given that the norms in academic life have traditionally catered to the ‘tastes and interests of the elite in society, especially the male elite, that are institutionalised as legitimate knowledge in every field’ (p.12).

My critique is drawn from critical and feminist perspectives and supported through a scoping literature, taken from international reports calling for a new social contract for education (UNESCO 2021) and new counter-cultural social movements in evidence today (Blackmore 2022). I am conscious of the vastness of higher education, and the complexity of tackling the problem of care relations and how it plays out to assure, nullify and/or move beyond a dualistic positioning, and to positively influence ‘equality of condition’ in higher education (Lynch & Baker 2005). I will therefore confine this critical and feminist scrutiny to the aspect of higher education I am most familiar with: my academic life in one higher education institution as a teacher educator and researcher in the south west of Ireland. I understand teachers’ work practices and research as values-led, relational practices that are ‘dialogical’ (neither teacher-centred nor student-centred) and with critical capability to interrupt, search, research, refuse, redefine and transgress the mainstream neoliberal and gendered construction of the discourse operating today across all sectors in education (Mooney Simmie 2023; Mooney Simmie, O’Meara, Forster, Ryan, & Ryan 2024).

The etymology of ‘education’ means to ‘lead out with care’. Education is never an innocent and politically-neutral practice coming from nowhere. Cain (2016) shows how education and teaching are viewed either as a relational process/journey or as a meritocratic destination of measurable outcomes based on ‘what works’. From that perspective the educator seeks to turn the gaze of the student in a particular direction, and policy imperatives are generally aligned to the rapidly changing needs of the economy and politics. At the same time, it is not only the needs of the state that are at stake. For a relational journey of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ human,

depends on whether or not educators believe in the existence of an inner (soul) life and who we think we are as human subjects. The purposes of education are therefore multiple and connected to a contradictory journey of human being, becoming, and constantly navigating new modes of associated living with self, others (human, non-human), the environment; and the planet (Haraway 2016; Mooney Simmie & Moles 2020).

In this paper, I explore how equity and care relations are framed in theory and in practice and represented in higher education (Moreau 2016; Hook, Moreau & Brooks 2022). I will critically scrutinise how this taken-for-granted framing of care relations can be radically disrupted in order to re-generate care-full academic norms for equity understood as a four dimensional model of 'equality of condition' in the academy of teacher education (Lynch & Baker 2005).

Higher education institutes are the designated places in society where new scientific knowledge is generated through research and communities of researchers. This scientific knowledge has historically been presented as coming from a place of objectivity and neutrality, untainted with prejudice and unconnected to the messiness of human life and power and prejudice. The Cartesian duality familiar since the Enlightenment has framed the upstanding, rational and ascetic Man of Science as a person detached from all emotional and irrational aspects of humanity (Bang 2017). In this regard, the gendered nature of science-as-we-know-it has historically been presented as pure and pristine, as a trustworthy source of new knowledge precisely because scientists are unconnected to who are as humans in nature and in the world.

More recently, and especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, we have come to better understand the inequality and injustice located in such a narrow view, expressed on one hand through social media feeds of misinformation, and on the other through counter-narratives of 'scientism' and 'consensualism' found in the prevailing 'Dogmatic Image of Thought' (Bang 2017; Deleuze 1994) in the academy that brokers no affordances for other ways of knowing (e.g. experiential, situated, community).

This western framing offers a dichotomy of mind and body directed away from the emotional and the affective. This elite Man of Science is separate from Nature and is therefore considered to be able to stand back and control the world as he successfully searches for new knowledge in a care-free life of academic norms. This care-free framing starts to crumble today in light of the challenges to survival of humanity brought about by the coronavirus pandemic and the new urgency for climate action and sustainable development. Lynch and Baker (2005) assert the key role played by emotions in developing a politics of affectivity, trust, solidarity, and concern for others, that is central to the functioning of a pluralist democratic society: 'it is only by being in touch with one's own vulnerability that one can develop empathy and concern for others, while having an appreciation of one's own dependency needs enables one to be compassionate' (p. 29).

Jane Gilbert (2022) writing about stories of 'science as saving the world', urges us therefore to (re) conceptualise the prevailing Cartesian view of science-as-we-know-it in order to radically disrupt the dualistic thinking system that has already helped to cause many of the problems in the planet in the first instance. Tan (2014) offers a similar analysis from a critical scrutiny of human capital theory, understood by economists as being a 'good enough model to describe all of human behaviour', and that positions the primacy of the economy in

education as it renders into a subsidiary position all other aspects of what it means to be human, including its moral, ethical, social, cultural and political dimensions.

The domination of the positivistic Man of Science is in evidence today in the academy of teacher education. Barnett (2024) describes the model that best describes the mainstream discourse in contemporary higher education as a scientific/entrepreneurial model. Gilbert (2022) reveals how the often assumed and normalized relations between scientists and their detached relations to nature has acted in ways throughout history that allow certain groups of people to become the insiders and ‘knowers’ (e.g. elite white men) and other groups of people, especially women and minorities to be oppressed and colonized. In contemporary times, Lynch and Crean (2019) reveal the patriarchal underpinnings located within the gendered nature of the social organisation of care relations in academic life, relations that have always been necessary but never valued and frequently relayed from a gendered perspective as women’s work.

Drawing on extant scholarship, I acknowledge that the affective dimension of care work is necessary to all aspects of academic life, and integral to ‘equality of condition’ (Lynch & Baker 2005). However, sharing the work of maintaining care-full academic norms and affective labour in the academy is not considered the same for everyone employed in academic life today. Neither is there a glorious past to call on in this regard. Tronto (2009) reminds us that privileged irresponsibility operates in hierarchical and elite institutions, where some academics are conferred with the testimonial authority enabled to say what needs to be done without an expectation that they will engage in the practices of doing. With increasingly stricter divisions of labour in academic life, and new precariat employment roles for university lecturers and university teachers, it is often the case that other academic colleagues are expected to pick up the pieces of this mostly unrecognised affective labour (Ivancheva, Lynch & Keating 2019).

I will now conduct my critique using an approach of deconstruction that requires three levels of reading as recommended by Gilbert (2022) and drawn from theorisations of Irigaray (1987). According to Gilbert (2022), the main aim of this approach of deconstruction ‘is change, particularly in relation to the idea-systems, and in situations where these idea-systems are seen to be oppressive. It is a process for trying to break out of, and see beyond, the conceptual categories that, at a very deep level, structure the way we think’ (p. 265). This study can therefore open up spaces from which it becomes possible to ‘see the system – and think-differently’ (p. 265) and in this way to radically disrupt the old paradigms. This is of particular importance given that science-as-we-know-it and its imbrication with power/politics in higher education today is underpinned by appeals for new academic policies of *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* (EDI) and a policy focus on increasing the number of women employed as academics, and expressed in university strategic plans and Athena Swan Awards.

I have structured the paper as follows. In the first level reading, I conduct a masculinist reading of care relations and equity in higher education as it plays out in the present thinking system. The aim here is to interpret and master the text in ‘order to be able to explain the analyst and writer’s intended meaning’ (Gilbert 2022, p.270). I follow this with a second level reading, where I critically scrutinise the topic from the perspective of the cultural historical context of the past. This second level reading looks ‘underneath the concepts examined in the first reading’ and explores ‘the wider historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts on which these concepts were developed’ (p. 271). Finally, in the third level reading, I interrogate the topic using a ‘negative’ or ‘female’ reading as I seek ‘to read “between the lines”, looking for the blanks, the negatives, for what has been left out in the masculinist search for ‘positivity’

(p.270). Given that no reading level is considered more superior than any other, the deconstruction will therefore act to re-insert equity, care, justice and complexity to radically disrupt the discourse, to move beyond hidden assumptions and to reveal how we might regenerate new care-full academic norms.

First level reading - A Masculinist reading

A masculinist imaginary is on display today in the gendered nature of the social organisation of all aspects of academic life, through rules, codes, and the pursuit of a constant comparison machinery of metrics, rankings, and an unrelenting competitive push toward excellence. This strategic policy imperative is deemed to be fully measurable and manageable in an organisation that continues to be structured as a hierarchically-ordered system (Blackmore 2022; Fraser 2022; Lynch 2022). The neoliberal enculturation moves apace as the organisation is pushed into the markets by decreasing levels of government funding and at a time of increasing ‘massification’.

Given the dominance of the discourse of scientists as neutral and objective, equity in higher education is abstracted to managerial rules, protocols and norms across all aspects of academic life. Deleuze’s ‘Dogmatic Image of Thought’ can be seen in the gaps between theory and practice and between system change and pleas for increasing numbers of women to join academic life.

In higher education institutions, teacher education is represented using a mantra of ‘what works’ that (re)frames teaching as evidence-based practices that can be atomised and underpinned by instrumental approaches and pre-scripted norms and codes no longer requiring the reflexivity of academic faculty or teachers across the sector (Mooney Simmie, Moles & O’Grady 2019; Mooney Simmie & Moles 2020). This reveals the inner workings of the scientific/entrepreneurial model of organisation (Barnett 2024), and the influence of supranational organisations, such as the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD) (Mooney Simmie 2023), in the framing of the SMART (Self-regulating, Motivated, Adaptive, Responsible, and Tech savvy) student. This notion of education’s strive toward the SMART student is unencumbered with care relations toward others or recognition of interdependencies (Lee & Lee 2023).

In the last decade, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has increasingly moved toward a discourse of ‘science-as-saving-the-world’ and with little or no attention paid to other ways of knowing. This dehumanising discourse is normalised by an increasing level of government regulation. In Ireland, this is seen in the increasing power of the Teaching Council as a statutory body, not only responsible for oversight of the profession, but also the body tasked with accrediting and having the disciplining oversight of ITE programmes in higher education.

The numerical objectification of all disciplines, and especially teacher education, is on display in contemporary higher education with a reduction in the importance given to the foundational disciplines, a diminution in the arts and humanities (e.g. history and philosophy of education), and in the framing of care as obligation and responsibility for a (masculinist) duty of care. This is in preference to a feminist view of care relations as deeply entangled and embodied practices requiring dialogue and mutuality for a trust-building process rather than a product focus.

I argue here that care relations are deeply implicated in all aspects of academic life in higher education. However, academic life is nowadays reconfigured using a new type of academic

workload model (in Ireland and elsewhere), and subdivided into (1) teaching, (2) service and (3) research. Scoring sheets of different weightings for each area are used in progression reviews and interviews, and normalised as a fair and equitable approach to promotion of faculty.

Many academics today, especially women academics and academics from minority groups, are tasked with front-of-house ‘academic housework’ and service tasks, and dealing directly with the public. Relations between academics are reduced from robust academic dialogue and contestation of issues for public interest values to a one-sided mechanism of hierarchical reporting lines to other colleagues acting as (senior) managers within the organization (Acker 2012). For example, academics who serve as Course Directors of programmes can be given full responsibility for the recruitment, delivery, quality reviews of programs, answering demands from students, regularly reporting upwards in a hierarchical organisation where there is often minimal or no dialogue/support from a neoliberal-patriarchal social organisation, increasingly operating as a state-centred system of performance management (Selwyn & Gašević 2020).

Second level reading - Cultural historical context

In this the second reading of the problem, I scrutinise the positioning of (academic) scientists and the discourse of science-as-we-knew-it from the past perspective of the cultural and historical context. Since the Enlightenment, and the start of the Humboldtian ideal of a university, higher education was constructed as an elitist and patriarchal organisation. Access to the hallowed halls of this former institution were limited to white, privileged, heterosexual males who acted out all aspects of academic life in care-free ways, within ‘privileged irresponsibility’ (Tronto 2009).

A strong discourse of ‘science-as-saviour’ was constantly kept in play by, amongst other things, a spectacle of pomp and ceremony in distinctive gowns as social markers of elite taste and distinction. This colonising discourse retained strong dualistic distinctions between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ knowledge, and the signs and symbols associated with specialist and authoritative knowers. Appeals to elite forms of sacred knowledge played out through discourses of theology and holistic constructs, such as those found in *Bildung* and the Humboldtian ideal (Barnett 2024).

Within a Cartesian dualism, a sharp distinction was made between head, heart and hand, and between those who were marked out as from Nature and therefore exploitable (including women and minorities) and this elite group of unmarked white males, not from Nature (Lynch & Crean 2019). Similar distinctions that can be found in conceptual thinking today through the categorisation of skills as either cognitive (e.g. scientific) or non-cognitive (e.g. social/emotional).

The human being at the centre of this essentialist discourse of higher education was understood as the (linear) rational man, whose superior intelligence, moral constraint (asceticism) and financial wealth, allowed affordances for care-free time away from the necessary care-based activities associated with how best to live well in the world (Tronto 2009), to dedicate time to thinking, writing and exclusive membership of a privileged club. At the same time, this Man of Science enjoyed an enduring special relation with the State (e.g. securing the research funding for large-scale projects that supported economic competitiveness, and national security).

What the post-humanists have done for education, such as Haraway (2016), is that while lowering the exceptionalism of the human, and challenging humanists to think otherwise, they have positioned everyone as part of Nature and with responsibility for its future survival and care. The social organisation of higher education from the past is best depicted as a scientific/metaphysical model, albeit within an analytical philosophy that brokered no connectivity to the body, the feminine and/or affective equality. There was no policy effort made to divorce this elite male knower from knowledge until the start of neoliberalism as a political project in the 1980s. At that point, it became necessity to free knowledge from the constraints of moral authority (knowers) so that higher education, and all sectors of education, could be commodified and set free like money to flow unimpeded through a marketplace.

In the US, the Gulbenkian Commission (1996) amalgamated the various traditions of science - the natural sciences, social sciences and applied sciences. Teacher education - formerly understood within the social sciences - was now prized open and the necessary gaps between theory, experience, research, policy and practice were captured by an overemphasis on the applied sciences, metrics, new management, and measurement (Selwyn & Gašević 2020).

For the last twenty years or more, teachers' practices were (re)configured as evidence-based practices, requiring scientific planning, diagnostics, and the (re)positioning of students as objects-of-research and for self-evaluation, and with no recognition of the need for localised autonomous judgements (Mooney Simmie & Moles 2020; 2024). The teacher educators' democratic assignment became reframed as a call to civic obligation for the individual rather than equity, care and justice for the greater good of humanity and the planet (Edling & Mooney Simmie 2020).

Third level reading - Relational fluidity and interdependencies

The third level reading undertaken here calls for a 'female' reading of care relations and equity in higher education, for a radical disrupting, refusing, redefining, and reimagining the discourse of science-as-we-know-it through a process model that is values-based, relational, care-full, ethical-political, and humanising, that foregrounds Nature, intersectionality and multiple ways of knowing. An academic model of what science-can-be-and-become so that it can 'stay with the trouble' and the contradictions rather than rush headlong to closure and dualism (Haraway 2016).

Today, academic norms are contested. Within calls for 'equality of condition' and the relational fluidity of post-humanist pedagogies of vulnerability, science-as-we-know-it has started to 'complexify' and to offer a counter-point to a care-less performativity. There is evidence of a strong feminist contribution, theorising care relations and affective equality in ways that redefine an ethic of care in higher education, within the aim of re-generating care-full academic norms for achieving equity in theory and in practice (Lynch & Crean 2019; Moreau 2016).

Nel Noddings, and other philosophers of education draw from Martin Buber's theorisation of the philosophy of relationship to underscore that relationships of learning are always care-centred and inclusive of an immeasurable 'I-Thou' aspect in addition to functional 'I-IT' aspects (Morgan & Guilherme 2012). Affective equality reconfigures a holistic and integrated discourse of education away from individualism, institutionalism, and markets toward new framings of interdependencies that can work to re-orient higher education away from

competition and toward ‘equality of condition’ for care, justice, and equity (Lynch & Baker 2005).

Academics, who are teacher educators, can radically disrupt the discourse through engaging as reflexive and emancipatory educators/researchers that make a difference in securing care-full academic norms and equity in the living contradictions of their practices. Their academic service work not only needs to reflect these academic care-full norms but needs to be mirrored by all colleagues and those who occupy leadership positions in the social organisation of academic life.

Insights generated and conclusions

The insights revealed here show the discourse of science-as-we-know-it is framed today as a hyper-masculinist imaginary of competitiveness and excellence for the individual in a hierarchically-ordered high-performing organisation that is being pushed into the markets by ever-decreasing levels of government-led public funding, and at a time of increasing massification of higher education.

This mainstream neoliberal-patriarchal imaginary is higher education deeply immersed in taken-for-granted care-free and gender-neutral norms, rules, codes, and principles seeking to assure *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* (EDI), albeit as a reified and abstract concept that appears to be commodified and divorced from the knower, their circumstance, and the living contradictions of their practices. At an institutional level, the discourse of equity, care and justice is abstracted to managerial protocols and norms but without any real change in practices in an elitist culture of competitive individuals and institutions.

In conclusion, a new integrated discourse of ‘science’ and ‘equality of condition’ is urgently needed rather than ‘scientism’ (science as God), where reflexive scientists are empowered to teach, serve, search, and research, with affordances for radically disrupting the dominating discourse of hyper-masculinities in academic life in order to move beyond binary thinking and care-free academic norms (Lynch & Baker 2005; Tronto 2009). This will require new responsive capacities for ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016), such as reimagining discourses of science-as-we-know-it and ethical-political discourses of care and equity to include recognition of other ways of knowing (e.g. situated knowledge), to foreground intersectionality, and to make space for the not-yet-thought to emerge as a way of securing an expansive discourse of higher education for the greater good of humanity and the planet.

This is Butler’s (2017) understanding of what is meant by academic freedom, the shared obligation of academics to act as the social conscience of the state in a democratic society, to mind the gap between the state and society, so that the state funds public education but is not fully in control of education in a democratic society.

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