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Radical disruptions: Regenerating care-full academic norms

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‘Kindred Spirit’ symbolises the connections, both human and other-than-human, that weave richly and invisibly across our lives. Encountering a kindred spirit elicits a sense of peace and calmness, as we recognise our self in another. The timeless nature of kindred connections reaches across space and time and throughout generations.

Felicity Cocuzzoli (Kennedy) is an artist-practitioner living on Worimi Country in Eastern NSW. A proud descendent of the Wiradjuri nation of Central NSW, Felicity’s creative inspiration draws deeply from the natural beauty of the coastal country on which she lives, and the deep wisdom of her ancestral connections. Her passion for mobilising the arts as a vehicle for equity and inclusion finds its expression in her work as a Learning Community Partnership Officer with the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle.

Cover image: *Felicity Cocuzzoli, Kindred spirit, (detail), 2024, fibre*

Image description: A detailed woven form in natural undied fibres and bright pink, yellow and orange fibres.

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EDITORIAL

Radical disruptions: Regenerating care-full academic norms

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Introduction

This Special Issue of *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education* engages with academic cultures through the conceptual lens of care. Building on Joan Tronto's encompassing definition of care, we understand care as 'the set of activities by which we act to organise our world, so that we can live in it the best way possible' (Tronto 2009, p. 14) and argue that academia represents a fruitful site to explore care work in its complexity and ambiguity. Higher education cultures epitomise a number of well-known tropes and binaries and, as such, offer a rich, heuristic terrain to capture the cultural and organisational norms which feed into processes of exclusion and inclusion. In particular, the association of academic excellence with elitism and masculinity tends to marginalise or, even, exclude certain forms of care work, and demand their invisibility. Being a carer (of a child or an adult, a friend or a relative) can compromise one's association with academic excellence (Moreau 2016). Indeed, in higher education contexts where quality and diversity have historically been construed as antagonistic, carers and groups who do not align neatly with the figure of the 'bachelor boy' (Edward 1993) become 'space invaders' (Puwar 2004) as they threaten to dilute or even 'pollute' the elitism or purity of academic cultures.

Research from this relatively small but quickly growing field highlights how being a carer in academia can be a fraught experience, especially for minoritised groups and those for whom 'care of the self' is rendered necessary, for example because of illness or disability (Burford & Hook 2019). The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has shed light on this troubled relationship between academic and care work, shifting the attention from the experiences of carers to the centrality of care work in and out of academia. While the policy intervention linked to Covid-19 has considered some forms of care work, other forms have remained broadly misrecognised. Recent research shows, for example, that some dimensions of

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caregiving (such as emotional labour) and some types of caring responsibilities (other than the parenting of young, healthy, abled children) remain broadly absent from the policy and scholarly discourses of academia. Claiming an identity as a caregiver risks further marginalising those who are already marginalised because of their positioning within the dominant race, gender, and sexual order (Moreau & Robertson 2017).

This Special Issue engage with ongoing debates among scholars, policy-makers and activists in the field, and how they render in/visible and mis/recognise care/rs through intersectional processes which are gendered, classed, and racialised. These discourses of care work and carers intertwine with dominant political ideologies, for example, the neoliberal discourses which often commodify and marketise equity agendas (Ivancheva, Lynch & Keating 2019), or the conservative, far-right agendas which push for the recruitment of international students, yet demonise migrants and stop them from travelling with their family to their country of destination (Tsegay 2022). Within these discourses, we are interested in looking at ruptures and continuities, such as moving away from special measures under Covid-19, and how these have or have not led to challenging the individualised, deficit discourses which construe care as a burdensome commodity slowing down the neoliberal machine. Yet research shows how care, as work, ethics, and affect, is productive and meaning-making. Thus, at the heart of this Special Issue is a concern for care work in its attachments to in/visibility and mis/recognition as well as care work in its generative capacity on a societal, institutional and individual level (for example when care giving/receiving is associated with personal and professional growth, or with the development of meaningful intra and intergenerational relationships).

Building on earlier work acknowledging that the academic canon reiterates the carefreeness of intellectual thinking and positions excellence as out of reach for many caregivers (Moreau & Galman, 2021), we include contributions which resist care-free and individualistic academic norms, instead renewing with the potentially radical and transformative power of care relations.

Care-full culture and practices in higher education

Research on caregivers often explores the social in/justices experienced by this group, implicitly or sometimes explicitly (for example, when comparing their experiences with those who do not hold significant caring responsibilities). While rendering caregiving experiences visible represents an important phase in the construction of the field, this focus risks constructing carers as the problem, and caring responsibilities as a burden, perpetuating the deficit marking of labour, values, and emotions associated with the 'feminine' and, more broadly, with the minoritised and the subalterns (Spivak 1988). It also risks obscuring the complex nature of care work highlighted above (i.e. how it is simultaneously alienating as well as pleasurable, generative, and transformative on an individual, kinship, and broader societal level).

Building on the foundational ideas of Kathleen Lynch (2010), we acknowledge and challenge long-lasting Cartesian assumptions of higher education which claim that scholarly work is separate from emotions, feelings, and reproductive work. Yet this Special Issue also calls for care and carers to be read through intersectional lenses. *Student carers in higher education: Navigating, resisting and redefining academic cultures* (Hook, Moreau & Brooks 2022) contributed an important update to the international scholarly field that examines care in the academy from this intersectional perspective. This collective edition drew attention to the complexities of participation for many student-carers but also foregrounded the possibilities and ethics of building momentum towards a 'care-centric' higher education. In particular,

scholars such as Lynch have drawn our attention to the norms and gendered implications of the carelessness of academia and to the multifaceted dimensions and manifestations of care, including in terms of physicality, emotions, feelings and organisational labour (Lynch, Bake & Lyons 2009; Lynch 2010, 2022).

Acknowledging diverse contributions

The contributions featured in this Special Issue adopt an intersectional and thin-grained approach to care in academia and elsewhere. This issue extends existing work by broadening the voices and experiences of care in the academy, therefore examining how care plays out in complex ways in the re/production of identities and in/equalities (Hook, Moreau & Brooks 2022). This issue continues to chart the emergence of more 'care-full' academic cultures engaging with diverse experiences and intimate portrayals of negotiating care and academic work. We purposefully make space for meaningful ways which go another step further in advocating for carefulness as business as usual in higher education, and beyond narrowly defined discourses of care linked only to 'access' and 'success' (Burke 2012; Lynch, Baker & Lyons 2009). Acknowledging that conventional forms of academic writing can be exclusionary, this Special Issue includes a diversity of formats that are mostly missing from academic publications, including kitchen table conversations, group-think critiques and autoethnographic writing.

Sally Welsh - Recognising and reimagining mature students' unpaid care work as a form of work-based learning

This article examines academic boundaries of the public and private spheres, and who is disadvantaged by this artificial division. In particular, Welsh draws on Gouthro's critical feminist theory of the homeplace to explore mature students' experiences of unpaid care work. As Covid-19 promoted homework and home-learning, Welsh outlines how hybrid work and study modes are shaped by unpaid care which remains under-valued and bound to individualised deficit within the academy. Using both narrative data and I-poems, Welsh calls for a reconceptualisation of work-based learning that recognises the contributions of mature-aged students and enhances gender equity.

Rachel MagShamhráin - Care-full academia: From autoethnographic narratives to political manifestos for collective action

In her contribution, MagShamhráin grapples with the impacts of 'coming out as a carer' within the academy after sending a mass email to colleagues detailing the complexity of her care arrangements. This article explores the personal cost of this revelation and most effective way of moving beyond a cost-heavy act of individual comings-out that conflict with institutional attitudes to such revelations. Challenging the mythical beast of 'work-life-balance', MagShamhráin explores the reliance on autoethnographic research for understanding the public-private question in higher education that requires the forfeiture of a right to privacy. The article seeks to contest the universal design for working in the academy that rewards excess and ways they have navigated the university's non-recognition of carers.

Anna Wanka, Nathalie Lasser and Moritz Hess - The in/visibilisation of education and care: University staff's perceptions of, experiences with, and reaction to the needs of care-giving students

Aligning strongly to the themes of this Special Issue, Wanka, Lasser, and Hess examine the experiences of carework in the academy beyond its existing focus on parents and children, and explore the experiences of students caring for older adults. Importantly, they contribute a dual perspective, focusing on the institutional systems of universities in Germany that shape the conditions for students caring for older adults as well as highlighting the perspective of academics who engage with these students, and navigate the underlying power relations between them. The article includes data from two focus groups with administrative personnel and another comprising persons holding teaching positions, exploring university staff perceptions, experiences, and reactions towards caregiving students. They astutely use the prompt question – 'How would you respond if someone brought grandma or grandpa to class?'. Drawing on the conceptual framework of micropolitics, this article highlights the experiences of students who provide informal care to adult family members and friends while also offering a critique of the systemic conditions that facilitate or hinder the reconciliation of studying and caregiving.

Eva-Maria Aigner and Jonas Oßwald - Is it simple to be parents in philosophy? A kitchen table dialogue

Aigner and Oßwald's article is an intimate exchange that demonstrates the tussle and tension between two academics negotiating their dual and individual conditions of account in higher education. Aigner and Oßwald are a PhD-candidate and a Post-Doc in philosophy while parents to their three-year-old child. They are skewered between the familial and the institutional; precarious temporary employments, scholarship-hopping, and underpaid teaching contracts. Together they share their own personal free-flowing conversation over the kitchen table, where they attempt to make sense of the ethics and contradictions between their university work and their care-work, and who will deal with the vomit from their sick child. The kitchen represents daily unpaid labor and subjugation, but also a place where, historically, those marginalised in philosophy and other academic disciplines often found time to write, think, and read in-between their multiple responsibilities.

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

Mooney offers a critique of the gendered nature of 'academic housekeeping', drawing on critical and feminist perspectives to 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. Mooney's article reminds us that the affective labour of care work is necessary to all aspects of academic life, but that sharing of the work of care and affective labour in the academy is not considered the same for everyone employed as an academic today. This article also refutes the myth of a glorious past to call on in regard to an idealised scholarly life. Mooney shares a masculinist reading of care relations and equity in higher education as it plays out in the present thinking system. She continues with a critique of care in the academy from the perspective of the cultural historical context of the past before interrogating the topic using a 'negative' or 'female' reading as she 'complexifies' the problem, to radically disrupt and move beyond hidden assumptions and how we might be best placed to re-generate care-full academic norms.

Margaret W. Sallee, Danielle V. Lewis, and Sara Kieffer - Collapsing borders: How online education shapes student-mothers' experiences in higher education

In this article, Sallee, Lewis and Kieffer explore ways that Covid-19 restrictions heralded a new era for online learning, resulting in both challenges and opportunities to all students, but the authors argue the consequences of this transition to online learning was/is especially heightened for student-parents. Sharing findings from a national, longitudinal study with student-mothers in the United States, the authors examine the challenges students faced engaging in coursework while caring for their children who were at home with them. The authors draw on Clark's work-family border theory which demonstrates how individuals create boundaries between distinct areas of their lives. Their analysis demonstrate how online education enabled student-parents to address their responsibilities by integrating rather than segmenting the competing domains of academia and the family. Although the move to online courses was made both for financial as well as health reasons, ultimately it also proved to be care-full for the participants whose experiences are highlighted in this contribution to this Special Issue.

Katrina McChesney, James Burford, Liezel Frick - Living the best way possible: Distance doctoral students navigating care for others and themselves

In this article, McChesney, Burford, and Frick share care-related insights from an international survey involving 521 doctoral students who undertook their studies wholly or partly off-campus. Over half these respondents had caring responsibilities for others, underlining the importance of distance modes for student carers. Outlining the survey results, the authors highlight that many carer respondents felt distance modes offered the best way possible to organise life, education, and caring responsibilities. Offering an important perspective, the authors include self-care as part of their analysis with a discussion that encompasses students managing specific physical or mental health needs, as well as being proactive in caring for themselves through the challenges of doctoral education. The authors also share insights into un-even distribution of in/visibility of doctoral students and further our understanding through their focus on a sub-group of carers who have experienced relatively less visibility: distance doctoral students with care responsibilities.

Chizuru Nobe-Ghelani and Marisa Barnhart - Care as experiential pedagogy: Soil building in social work education

Taking up our invitation for creative and innovative thinking, Noble-Ghelani and Barnhart's contribution draws on the metaphor of hot composting and soil building to offer a new perspective on experiential learning can be deployed in the classroom to cultivate communities of care. As social work scholars and educators, the authors outline how their commitment to care-centered pedagogy is informed by our bodies of intersecting privileges and marginality. Noble-Ghelani and Barnhart use their own exchanges of letters and text messages as moments of witnessing how their co-conceptualisation of care as pedagogy is coming together. In their classrooms, as social work educators, they are not only responsible to care for their students, to meet students in their whole personhood, but they also believe that care itself can be an experiential pedagogy, and the work they do in their classrooms must be aligned to the kinds of principles and actions they want students to take up as they enter their work. Relating this care-full pedagogy to soil and compost, the authors note that preparing the soil is essential if one wants to have good growing conditions, as opposed to compacted soil which they relate to structural violence that has hardened the ground that is shared inside and outside the classroom.

A Western Sydney University Collective: Sky Hugman, Ana Rodas, Leisha Du Preez, Ashlee Gore, Donna James, Julia Kantek, and Anna Leditschke - The day 'care' came up: Agitations for care-full approaches to inspire flourishing academic lives

The 'Super Friends' dialogue shared in this article is a collective conversation that seeks to provoke the imagining and enacting of alternative academic futures. This all-women collective writing group agitates for ethical and pedagogical approaches to writing and its support, and provides a roadmap for collective academic work that we all wish we had access to. The 'Super Friends' group acts as a form of care-full scholarship that seeks to disrupt an increasingly competitive and productionist university landscape underpinned by a masculinised 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010). Also taking up our call for creative contributions, the 'Super Friends' share their writing group impact through poetry and analysis. Linked to carefulness in the academy, the act of offering their writing to the collective, often in very raw states, has forged kinship connections, challenged conventions, and generated alternative ways of working. The writing collective writes to decentre the effects of performance rankings and metrics and the way they permeate writing practices and the prioritisation of the competitive academic, making room for relationality, and against individualised academia.

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Recognising and reimagining mature students' unpaid care work as a form of work-based learning

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This research paper explores how unpaid care work is positioned on mature students' undergraduate degrees in English further education (FE) colleges. It offers a new perspective by considering the impact of this form of labour on learning in the home during COVID-19 lockdowns, presenting both narrative data and I-poems created using the Listening Guide. The paper calls for care work to be reimagined as a legitimate type of work-based learning which can make valuable contributions to higher education (HE) degrees. The paper also adds to existing theoretical perspectives on mature students by exploring Gouthro's (2005; 2009) critical feminist theory of the homeplace. Her theory is applied to a mixed group of mature students in a range of family units and evaluated. Findings indicate that home-schooling became another form of care work in students' homes. Care work was gendered and existing scripts about the roles of 'proper mams' reinforced the expectation that women should prioritise their families. This affected the female students' autonomy as learners. The article discusses why institutional recognition of unpaid work is necessary for gender equity and argues for the promotion of critical social literacy about gendered work to counter individualised deficit understandings. As hybrid work and study modes continue, the recommendations have ongoing implications for HE provision.

Keywords: *mature students; HE in FE; the Listening Guide; the homeplace; work-based learning*

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Introduction

The decline in mature students' engagement with higher education (HE) is a matter of growing concern in the UK (Butcher 2020; Office for Students 2020). In 2010/11, there were more than 400,000 mature undergraduate entrants but by 2017/18 this had fallen by 40% to fewer than 240,000 (Hubble and Bolton 2021). The steepest declines have been in England and in the numbers of mature students over the age of 30 (Million Plus 2018). English widening participation initiatives and policy highlight the underrepresentation of mature students in HE (Office for Students n.d.), using a definition based on age and level of study (over 21 for an undergraduate student and over 25 for a postgraduate). However, researchers in the field argue the terms 'mature-age student' (Mallman & Lee 2016, p. 685) and 'mature student' (Waller 2006, p. 115) are not nuanced enough to account for the varying backgrounds of this category of under-represented students. This paper presents research which seeks to understand the complex working lives of HE in further education (FE) mature students who are over the age of 25. All too often research stops 'at the door of the HE institution' (Callender 2018, p. 90). This paper considers how mature students' learning interacts with their labour at home and why a reconceptualisation of work-based learning is necessary to recognise their contributions, enhance gender equity, and ultimately increase their participation.

This inquiry explores the question: How does the learning of mature students interact with their care work at home? Narrative data were collected from 15 mature students who were enrolled in undergraduate degrees at three FE colleges in the north of England. This took place in 2021 when England was emerging from a final COVID-19 lockdown. I argue that their experiences can be best understood by employing a critical feminist theory of the homeplace which challenges the dominance of marketplace values in adult education settings. The paper also argues that a feminist approach to data analysis, the Listening Guide, offers different insights to the more typical thematic analysis of mature students' experiences (e.g. Fenge 2011; Robinson 2012; Welsh 2020).

The paper begins with a discussion of employability in the lifelong learning sector and focuses on its instantiation in Foundation degrees which are highly gendered. It then turns to a discussion of Patricia Gouthro's (2005; 2009) theory of the homeplace and argues that this offers a useful framework to analyse the participants' narratives about learning during a lockdown. I then explain my research and data analysis methods. The second part of the paper discusses the findings. I conclude that home-based care work is highly gendered and is positioned as a form of non-work, hence it is overlooked as a valuable source of HE learning. Reimagining work-based learning would lead to enhanced gender equity for many mature students.

Lifelong learning and employability

Although the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has emphasised a holistic view of lifelong learning for over five decades (Faure et al. 1972; UNESCO 2020), in many international contexts mature students' potential is narrowly construed in terms of their future employment (Blackmore 2006; Merrill et al. 2020; Mojab 2006). UK lifelong learning policy has focused almost exclusively on economic productivity (Coffield 1999; Biesta 2006; Burke & Jackson 2007; Callender & Little 2015). This restricted perception overlooks unpaid care work and disregards the learning mature students gained from it.

The mature students in this research study HE courses at English FE colleges (FECs). These institutions are strongly oriented towards workforce development (Gadsby & Smith 2023; Gleeson et al. 2015). FECs teach a range of levels to students aged 14 and over. They offer HE at degree and sub-degree level.

Foundation degrees offer a good insight into how employability underscores HE in FE provision. 63% of Foundation degrees are taught in English FECs (Association of Colleges 2022). These English and Welsh qualifications, which are the equivalent of two thirds of a Bachelor's degree, were launched in 2001. They are discursively placed in 'the demand-led skills agenda of local labour markets' (Burke & Jackson 2007, p. 169) and are created in partnership with employers whose needs are foregrounded in policy documents (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2020). Employer collaboration is emphasised, and they contain mandatory work-based learning components. As HE in FE is strongly vocational, it tends to follow the gendered order which characterises vocational education and training (Blackmore 2006; Niemeyer & Colley 2015; Skeggs 1997; Welsh 2020). Women's Foundation degree subject choices are therefore consistent with occupations which are coded female: health and social care, childcare, beauty therapy and education courses (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2020). Indeed 66% of Foundation degrees were awarded to women in 2018/19 (ibid). However, the gendered nature of mature students' previous working lives (Burke 2011; Mannay & Morgan 2013; Stevenson & Clegg 2012) is not given ample consideration, so a claim that women on an Early Years Foundation degree 'were no longer constrained by gender in terms of educational choices' (Webber 2015, p. 233) seems naïve. Their pasts have led them to degrees in care-related subjects.

Many mature students bring relevant experience of paid and voluntary work into HE which they believe are valid for discussion in seminar contexts (Edwards 1993; Fenge 2011; Mojab 2006; Smith 2017). Yet, although their private experiences of family care may also be appropriate, many students believe they are not suitable for HE learning (Edwards 1993; Marandet & Wainwright 2010; Moreau 2016). This is an issue which disproportionately affects women as they are the majority of student parents and carers in the UK (Brooks 2012; National Union of Students 2009). This problem requires a critical feminist theoretical approach which asks why lifelong learning policy privileges the economy and downplays unpaid care. I discuss this in the following section.

A critical feminist theory of the homeplace

In England, the home became the site of mature students' formal HE learning and, for many, the site of their paid work and care responsibilities in March 2020. Parents helped children to learn at home as school buildings closed for most pupils. Disabled and elderly relatives were required to shield at home, so they required more support. Worldwide, the impact of these changes fell disproportionately on women, who already shouldered most of the burden for unpaid care (International Labour Organization 2020; United Nations 2020). With this in mind, a distinctive contribution to the field can be made by employing a critical feminist theory which investigates the home as a site for learning and care work. Such a perspective centres the role of labour in analyses and develops a discourse of challenge by asking what really matters in lifelong learning. Gouthro's (2004; 2005; 2009; 2010) theory of the homeplace draws on Habermasian concepts of the system and lifeworld and incorporates Fraser's (2020b) critique of critical theory's androcentric bias. Gouthro's theory troubles the dominance of neoliberal marketplace values in adult education and argues that the homeplace should carry equal importance and weight in lifelong learning discourse and practice. She elaborates on feminist arguments about who determines the boundaries of the public and private spheres and who is

disadvantaged by this artificial division (Davis 1981; Fraser 2017; Fraser 2020a; Weeks 2011). She locates her critique of the prevalent neoliberal framework in lifelong learning within the critical emancipatory tradition (Gouthro 2019; 2022). Key themes emerge in her work about the need for critical forms of pedagogy and support for mature students, which question dominant values and recentre the homeplace as a significant site for learning.

Gouthro focuses on the experiences of heterosexual women with children, proposing that learning experiences and the different values which constitute what counts as learning can be understood by examining three aspects of women's lives in the homeplace: identity, relationships, and unpaid labour. These three focal points inform women's learning in the homeplace and affect their ability to access and participate in lifelong learning. Although they are divided in her work, their conceptual boundaries are porous. Her discussion of identity and relationships both centre on gendered family roles, such as motherhood. Similarly, her elucidation of unpaid labour turns on gendered expectations of work which are tied to relationships within the homeplace. In other words, Gouthro somewhat blurs identity with relationships and her definition of both relationships and unpaid labour reflects the extent to which these are determined by gendered roles.

I chose to focus my analysis on relationships and labour. Different identities were not prominent in my interviews with participants; perhaps the liminality of available identities was blurred when they were not able to leave their homes in lockdown. The differentiation between mature students' different identities has been extensively researched and, in addition, the concept of identity can incur a tendency to essentialise (Edwards 1993; Walby 2023). Gouthro's lack of clarity around the identity concept and the fact that gendered identities such as father, husband, mother and wife are not applicable to those who are single or childless also made this an unhelpful analytical tool. Whilst Gouthro advocates extending her homeplace theory to other groups, is the lens of identity, which is perhaps inadequately theorised, helpful when participants are not heterosexual mothers?

Methods

Participants

Narrative research often focuses on a very small group of individuals who are interviewed more than once (Riessman 2008) but I decided that this might be unethical given that many people were overwhelmed in lockdowns. I used a snowball sample, a type of purposeful sample (Creswell & Poth 2018). The 15 participants shared four salient characteristics: they were all over 25 years of age; they were studying an undergraduate degree at FECs in northern England; they lived at home; and they all worked in a paid and/or unpaid capacity. The 15 participants began their undergraduate degree programmes before March 2020, with the exception of George who started his degree in September 2020. They were at different stages of their Foundation, full or top-up Honours degrees. The subjects varied but with one exception were care-related: Education; Childcare and Young People; Health and Social Care; Sports Therapy and Rehabilitation. Ten of the group were in full-time paid work. Nine were parents, two of these were single mothers, and one father did not live with his children. One cared for her elderly, disabled mother and was also a grandmother. Nine lived with a spouse or partner, two lived with friends, and four lived alone with or without children. Four of the participants identified as LGBTQI+. Two spoke English as a second language and one student received the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). Listing these characteristics demonstrates they are a heterogeneous group. I was anxious to avoid cementing the notion that care work was women's work (Lister 2003); however, I could not recruit more than five men. I also hoped for equal numbers of full-time and part-time students but only six participants are part-time. These

proportions reflect national mature student demographics in England (Association of Colleges 2022) and the UK (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2023).

Data collection

Each participant agreed to an online life history interview. I elicited stories about school days, previous jobs, and talk about their families. The interviews took place between April and June 2021 during a phased exit from the third national lockdown in England, so COVID-19 restrictions dictated the decision to interview participants remotely. The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and recorded.

Data analysis: The Listening Guide

My method of data analysis was the Listening Guide (LG). As a form of narrative analysis, the LG interpretation preserves the life history of participants and recasts how they are understood (Frank 2015). Firstly, I transcribed the video recordings in full. I preserved my questions and reactions in the transcripts, as I played a role in the construction of the participants' narrated self (Doucet & Mauthner 2008; Riessman 2008). After transcription, my analysis proceeded in four stages.

Reading 1: restorying, recurring language and reflexivity

Following the sociological LG approach of Doucet and Mauthner (2008), I read the interview transcript for the main plot of the life story, noting aspects of language such as recurring words and metaphors which were a resource used by participants to express complex feelings or ideas. I then wrote a detailed chronological summary of each participant's narrative which allowed me to identify their influential experiences and turning points (Golding & Hargreaves 2018; Riessman 2008). This 'restorying' (Creswell & Poth 2018, p. 72) immediately raised questions about my own personal background and political commitments, and I recognise that the emphases in my retelling inevitably reflect these. Simultaneously, as I worked through each interview transcript, I explored my reactions. I annotated my utterances as well as the participants'. My reactions were then explored as prompts for my thinking and analysis (Woodcock 2016).

Reading 2: Creating I-poems

The second reading of the LG focuses on the way in which respondents speak about themselves, their feelings and experiences (Doucet & Mauthner 2008). In practical terms, the researcher writes I-poems, which are a distinctive feature of the LG (Woodcock 2016). When the participant talks about themselves all the phrases which use 'I' are underlined, and important associated verbs or phrases are retained (Edwards & Weller 2012; Golding & Hargreaves 2018; Inckle 2020). I did this electronically and then cut and pasted these in sequence, placing each verb phrase on a separate line, like the lines of a poem. I included the use of 'we' and 'you' as alternative uses of the first-person pronoun. The creative poetic texts produced in the analysis engage the reader in a different relationship to the data (Carter, Sanders & Bray 2018; Edwards & Weller 2012; Inckle 2020) and allow readers to discern different voices which they may not be aware of in verbatim transcripts.

Reading 3: The self-in-relation

The third reading of the LG systematically examines how participants speak about their interpersonal relationships and social networks. In this reading, individualist conceptions of agency are replaced by a feminist understanding of the self-in-relation (Doucet & Mauthner 2008; Mauthner & Doucet 2011). I used highlighting to show participants' key relationships with others.

Reading 4: Enabling and disadvantaging structures
In the final reading, participants are placed within broader cultural and social contexts (Golding & Hargreaves 2018; Mauthner & Doucet 2011). I made notes on the ways in which structural factors, such as social class, gender, age, and sexuality, were seen by the participants as either enabling or disadvantaging structures. I was also interested in whether they were recognised as such or seen as private issues.

Ethical considerations
I adhered to the British Educational Research Association (2018) ethical code and was granted ethical clearance by Lancaster University. Volunteers emailed me signed consent forms before interviews and were offered transcripts for reading and comment. All individuals, FECs, and places were assigned pseudonyms as I transcribed the data.

Presenting the data
As a matter of social justice, I am committed to demonstrating the value of the mature students' narratives to HE discourses, so I grappled with how best to present these. As the social arrangements which brought the mature students into HE in FE can be traced in the narratives, I include transcript extracts. I-poems are also presented so readers can 'see representations of the different voices on a page and can interrogate them, questioning (perhaps) the meaning…or decisions made' (Riessman 2008, p. 137).

Findings and discussion

'Proper mams': The gendering of care work
The time which was available to the participants to study was largely determined by their unpaid care responsibilities and paid work. All the participants worked, but not all of them cared for other people, and they did not all have paid jobs. Amongst the 15 participants, care work was unevenly distributed: seven of the ten women had dependants, and they did most of their care work.

Male references to caring for others were limited. Richard, a part-time student, with no dependants, shopped for his grandmother in lockdowns. George, a full-time student, shared the care of his two children with his wife: 'She's very supportive on that front and well, if I have a deadline and I really need to just learn, she will stay with the kids and will keep them downstairs, and I'll be upstairs and working'. The dominant story from the transcripts was that care work for elderly people and children fell mainly to women, which negatively affected their learning, but this was not an outcome reported by the men. So although men in heterosexual couples may have increased their share of childcare and housework in lockdowns, women's unpaid workload also increased, leaving gender role attitudes undisturbed for the most part. My findings bear out a widely-noted trend in the UK lockdowns: many heterosexual couples moved to a 'back to the 1950s' (Chung et al. 2021, p. 219) division of labour. This phenomenon was not confined to the UK but also reported in countries which rate amongst the highest in the world for gender equality: Iceland (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir 2021), Germany (Yucel & Chung 2021), and Canada (Qian & Fuller 2020).

Liz worked full-time as a legal assistant, studied full-time, and had three school-aged children. She described the strain of domestic work and childcare not being shared with her male partner in lockdowns:

> Things haven't been great in that respect... a lot being put on me with the housework… the majority of the housework which is an absolute state at the

> moment. It's just with papers everywhere. But yes, housework, making sure that the children are fed, and they go to activities, so I'm taking them to activities and so a lot falls on me. [Liz's transcript]

Gouthro (2009) emphasises that in many heterosexual relationships the weight of domestic work and care is assumed to be an essential aspect of being a mother, wife, or adult daughter. In other words, a gendered division of work 'morphs into a gendered definition of work' (Weeks 2011, p. 63). Sue regarded caring for her elderly, disabled mother as daughter's work, and she also had wife's work. She worked as a full-time manager, and studied on a part-time degree course:

> Really what I should be doing is claiming Carer's Allowance or something, but I don't because to me, she's my mam. So obviously I do all the housework. I do her ironing and washing and make sure it's all done. My husband's a surface cleaner, so bless him, he'll keep it tidy throughout the week. But on the weekend, I go home and do my own cleaning. He won't iron. [Sue's transcript]

Gendered roles within the homeplace had a profound influence on the time available for mature women to study. The participants' life histories draw on cultural scripts which have moulded their expectations about labour in homeplaces and beyond. These 'taken-for-granted discourses' (Riessman 2008, p. 3) determine how it seems both natural and even correct to divide work into female and male categories: 'Dad went out to work full-time. My mam spent most of her life caring for my grandma, so she didn't work. Didn't go into work when we were kids. She was a proper stay-at-home mam' [Kate].

> My mam stayed at home. And dad was a labourer, he grafted. He worked really, really hard…. My mam, when she had us obviously, she stayed at home which back then was the done thing, I think. It was like the norm, and I remember going home from school to lovely home-cooked meals and lovely, you know, just she was a proper mam. [Sue's transcript]

The terms 'a proper mam' and 'full-time mam' recur in the transcripts. They have a prescriptive force: a mother should stay at home, cook, and care for family members. A learnt-at-home ethic of paid work can be discerned in the interviews, which valorises masculinised employment and defines family care as feminised 'non-work' (Weeks 2011). 'One [sister] used to be a teacher, but she doesn't do anything now. She's a mam' [Luke].

The impact of home-schooling

Existing gender-normative assumptions laid the ground for another form of care work to be added to some mature female students' workloads: home-schooling. By May 2020, women in the UK were spending an average of 22.5 hours per week on home-schooling and childcare, whereas for men the time spent was 12 hours (Xue & McMunn 2021).

> She [his wife] does more, she mostly did the home-schooling, especially last year when I was at work, she was doing a lot of it. I tried to do more because I'm better at maths than her, so I tried to help on that side. [George's transcript]

Although 47% of all UK workers were working from home in April 2020 (Chung et al. 2021), the opportunity for a more equitable distribution of care work provided by working from home was not evident. This is consistent with research findings from Austria, Hungary, Spain and the Netherlands (Derndorfer et al. 2021). As home-schooling was largely a gendered form of labour, the capacity for HE learning of many women students with school-aged children was

negatively affected. For student-mothers who had paid jobs, the supervision of home-schooling added a fourth dimension to their 'triple shift' (Smith 2017, p. 107). Home-schooling was only discussed in detail by five women who told me their own learning was at times pushed aside by home-schooling their children. All described how they had considered withdrawing from their degree programmes as they simultaneously tried to study, work, and home-school. In order to accommodate this form of unpaid labour, their own study time sometimes began as early as 5am and, for some, regularly went on past midnight.

The student-mothers felt isolated as they attempted to continue their own studies whilst also supervising home-schooling. Although online video conferencing sessions granted them access to learning, they were often unable to participate fully. Nicky was a full-time student and single parent with two children:

> I would have to maybe pause what I was doing to help them out with something. If she [child] needed us, I would have to say sorry to the tutor: 'I'm going to have to nip off for a minute'. [Nicky's transcript]

Liz found home-schooling three children very disruptive for her own learning: 'I'm stopping and starting for to help the kids with their work'. She called the periods of lockdown 'horrific' and applied for mitigation because she could not sustain studying: 'It was just the home schooling... I ended up, cos I was working as well, I ended up working late at night'.

Kim, a full-time student with a partner and two children, felt she was reaching breaking point:

> My husband was working in the supermarket, and he was working full-time, you know. So, I had my children, and I had my degree absolutely on my own and that was the first point that I thought, 'I can't do this. I'm gonna have to throw the towel in or something.' [Kim's transcript]

Using Gouthro's (2009) framework enables this problem to be conceptualised as a gendered structural issue rather than an individualised choice on the part of the carers. Their ability to learn was hampered by the expectation that women prioritise care for others in the homeplace above their other duties. Gouthro's theory highlights that a failure to acknowledge this in lifelong learning contexts sustains inequality for mature women who have care responsibilities. This denies them full citizenship where their perspectives and views are heard and discussed. By becoming mature students, some of the women had begun to embrace a form of autonomy in which care work and studying could be managed, albeit with some difficulty, but this was being threatened in lockdowns.

Kim explained how becoming a student in 2019 made her feel complete - 'My brain was turning on. I wasn't just a mam, I was Kim.' - but the lockdown forced a pivot:

> And then COVID happened
>
> I wasn't Kim
>
> I was a full-time mam
>
> I was
>
> I was home-schooling two children

> I had
>
> I had my children
>
> I had my degree
>
> I thought
>
> I thought
>
> I have to
>
> I have to stop the degree
>
> I can't say,
>
> I'm not going to be a mam. [Kim's I-poem]

Gouthro's (2004) theoretical argument is that for many caregiving mature female students, their student identity is almost peripheral to their central familial identities; however, my argument is that what is at stake is not so much the conflict between a new identity and a residual one, rather it is their work in relation to other people that threatens their HE learning. Prior to lockdowns, Kim accommodated being a student and a mam, but when the labour of home-schooling was added to her existing care work, she struggled to sustain her degree.

Institutional recognition of care work as a legitimate contributor to HE learning

The 'Great Interruption' (Rikowski 2021, p. 33) of norms caused by the pandemic is an opportunity to rethink aspects of HE provision. Evidential requirements for mitigation were softened and reductions in the hours required for some work-based learning modules were agreed. Yet rigidity around the classification of what counts as work stubbornly persisted. Nonetheless, forms of relational labour and skills learnt outside workplace settings could be considered as potential sites for relevant learning in vocational degree subjects such as Health and Social Care, Children and Young People, Education, and Sports Therapy and Rehabilitation.

The lack of opportunity to undertake any work-based learning in lockdowns frustrated several participants. 'You can't get the placement hours that you need due to COVID' [Luke]. Luke was a full-time Sport Therapy and Rehabilitation student with two children who did not live with him. However, five participants were in fact undertaking a brand-new form of unpaid work within the homeplace:

> I've not been on any work placement in Level 5, any formal one, and they're gonna mark us as saying we haven't been on any placement due to COVID, but actually I'm fairly sure that as parents we could probably say, 'Well, can I give you how many thousand hours of this experience that I've had home-schooling?' [Kim's transcript]

Amber, Kim and Nicky were required to complete work-based learning modules on their Children and Young People Foundation degree. They worked at home-schooling in the lockdowns, but this labour was formally disregarded by their FECs despite its clear relevance to their degree. 'Within academia, raising children and attending to family needs are treated as concerns that are incidental and inconsequential (rather than as primary *productive* work)'

(Gouthro 2002, p. 11). Edwards (1993) also finds whilst mature women at university feel their experiences in the public world of work are useful for understanding social science issues, their family experiences are not formally valued. This disjuncture is amplified in the lifelong learning sector because of its emphasis on employability. Although relevant life experiences may be discussed in class, they do not count (Allatt & Tett 2021). Kim believed her social reproductive work could certainly be reimagined as a form of work-based learning:

> I done a whole module on pregnancy, breastfeeding
>
> I got 94%
>
> I'm laughing
>
> I've twice been on that work experience placement! [Kim's I-poem]

The participants frequently emphasised how important their maturity and life experiences were in guiding their degree study, but with the exception of Kim, they all rejected my contention in the interview that their informal, family-based relational learning could be applied formally to their current learning in lockdowns. Although 'workplace learning does not just happen in waged situations' (Brookfield & Holst 2010, p. 18), most participants thought there could be no relationship at all between their situated homeplace knowledge and their degree study. Conceptually, the term 'skills' in the FEC landscape is attached to the notion of work-readiness and industry (Duckworth & Smith 2018; Smith & O'Leary 2013) so homeplace skills were seen as unrelated to the dominant notion of what work is. Yet a different worldview is possible, and education can provide ways to think about the established social order differently (Gouthro 2019).

Some participants had adverse adolescent experiences and they shaped their life histories to make direct links between these and their entry into the field of paid care-related work which eventually led to their degrees. For example, Kim was brought up by her grandparent because she was estranged from her mother who had drug and alcohol addictions. They were very poor: 'My life was extremely chaotic by the time 15, 16 came'. However, after she had children, she worked for a breastfeeding charity, and this led her to a Children and Young People Foundation degree: 'I worked with lots of disadvantaged mothers that needed to breastfeed. That was what they needed to do 'cause they couldn't afford otherwise'. Stephen was victimised because he was gay: 'I was bullied all through senior school, called names, spat at, kicked as I went into classrooms. All sorts of things used to go on, and I just hated school'. Adults did not protect Stephen; instead he was told to fight back. His top-up Honours degree was Education, as was Sue's, who believed school 'failed' her as a youngster. Later she worked 'for an organisation where they supported troubled teenagers who'd had a bit of an experience like me at school. I related to them very well'. Jess was living independently at 18 and she reflected on her teenage years:

> I've got seven siblings below me
>
> I'm from a large family
>
> I've got a sister who had speech and language issues
>
> I went through so much
>
> I've got so much personal experience

Being in the home

Seeing sort of the effects of what divorce does

As a child

Experiencing it

Seeing it again

As a 16, 17-year-old

Supporting my mum and my siblings

I came across so many different things

I have another sister who has mental health issues

I've had a lot of experience. [Jess' I-poem]

Jess' learning was valuable for her Supporting Teaching and Learning Foundation degree. Like Kim, Stephen, and Sue, she acquired relational skills as a result of her family and teenage experiences. These are necessary in educational settings when dealing with children or young people who are also experiencing difficulties or trauma.

Why is workplace experience deemed to be objective and legitimate for assessment on Education, Childcare, Sports Therapy, and Health and Social Care degrees, whereas unpaid care is illegitimate because it is subjective? The inconsistency stems from the positioning of paid work as superior to unpaid care. Given that FE has long been characterised as UK industry's servant (Duckworth & Smith 2018), it is not surprising that this notion is perpetuated in HE in FE assessment. The erasure of meaningful discussion of private care in the public realm of HE is part of the adoption of 'marketplace values' (Gouthro 2002, p. 2). Care work in the home is not costless, nor is its contribution to the economy negligible (Fraser 2017). The denigration of this labour, which is mostly undertaken by women, as non-work is deliberate and enables it to go unpaid. Bringing forms of critical social literacy into mature student education can raise awareness of structural injustice, which I turn to next.

Critical social literacy

In her degree, Nicky learned to bring her homeplace relational learning and skills into dialogue with theory:

Being a mum has helped me

We've had to

I've been able to relate it to situations

I've been through. [Nicky's I-poem]

Here Nicky's reflection on her experience (being a mum) took place in class (we). She was then able to analyse her own experiences in discussion with others. However, she found an assignment on child safeguarding difficult because of a personal experience. Safeguarding underpins practice in Education, Health and Social Care, and Children and Young People's

settings, so is a fundamental part of these vocational degree subjects. Safeguarding ensures action is taken to protect children from risk or harm, and to promote their health and well-being. In 2020, Nicky's eldest child, who was still at school, did not return from her daily exercise and would not respond to her mother's calls. She had gone to her older boyfriend's home. Nicky was in 'meltdown'. Despite Nicky's pleas and the breach of COVID-19 restrictions, the police force refused to act because her daughter was an adult. Considering safeguarding in an academic setting later exacerbated Nicky's unease about the episode. The interrogation of this past experience in an academic setting proved to be painful for Nicky (Edwards 1993; Lister 2003).

At the centre of Nicky's experience lies the considerable institutional power of the police and the resources available to a single mother. Questions arise about female power and the extent to which learning about safeguarding can account for a failure to protect a young adult woman who is potentially at risk and breaking the law. Such political questions have the power to destabilise conceptions of state authority as a neutral entity. Adult education can encourage students to perceive the world around them in more critical ways, making them more attuned to systematic inequality. This type of critical reflection on power relations in homeplaces and communities is an important project for adult education, but it can be discomfiting (Gouthro 2019; Grace, Gouthro & Mojab 2003). However, 'critical social literacy' (Duckworth & Smith 2021, p. 35) is important because it develops students' facility to interpret their own position and the wider social relations that shape their lives. In Nicky's case, her analysis of the episode could not be part of her assessed work; however, her experience and thinking meant she was able to develop a new perspective on how powerful actors can close down the claims of the less powerful. Her life history included the story of her ex-husband, whose gendered abuse completely removed her self-esteem. He sneered at her ambition to return to education, told her she 'would never do anything' and made her feel worthless at home. Later, with the support of her HE tutors, Nicky claimed a different, more powerful position.

Kim also moved on from initial feelings of shame about her maturity and motherhood when she first started her degree: 'I was thinking people are gonna think I'm a lecturer. People are gonna think, "What are *you* doing here?"'. Through a combination of her lived experience and educational research, Kim came to understand she was not alone, but was part of a wider group, the 'student parent' whose needs are frequently overlooked (Brooks 2012; Marandet & Wainwright 2009; Moreau 2016; Moreau & Kerner 2015). She discussed in detail issues that affect student parents, which ranged from the lack of maternity rights for pregnant students to inadequate breastfeeding facilities at her college: 'my friend…she'd be sitting in pain by the end of the day because she needed to express [breastmilk], there was nowhere for her to go at all!' Thus she understood the experience of student parenthood is institutional rather than simply individual.

> They've got children. They want to better themselves. They'll start to go and do this FE course; will not get much support and they'll drop out. And on an emotional level as a parent, imagine thinking that you want to do something so much better for your child and you try, you make an effort, you make that big step, but then there's a big wall there. There's something that doesn't work, finance or childcare or something. Imagine that feeling of stepping back and thinking: 'I really tried, but I couldn't. I tried to be the best mam I could, but I couldn't do it.' [Kim's transcript]

Kim’s empathy was grounded in both her own experience and her awareness of injustice, not least the structural poverty which affects this group. Being able to move between these standpoints enabled her to see the social relations which produce oppressive conditions for student parents. Working with mature students to develop critical perspectives on how systemic barriers play a role in their engagement with education can help them to shed the humiliation some feel for not learning as quickly as younger students or for looking different from them. Questioning the values ascribed to mature students’ labour, acknowledging the importance of care work and relational skills, and their positive contributions to HE learning is therefore urgently necessary.

Conclusion

This article calls for a reimagination of work-based learning in England to encompass forms of unpaid care. It advances our understanding of how labour in the homeplace and relational learning could be afforded value. Experiential knowledge associated with marginalised groups such as working-class women is frequently misrecognised (Duckworth & Smith 2021; Skeggs 1997). I stand with others (Burke & Jackson 2007; Callender 2018; Gouthro 2009) to argue that whilst embedding respect for learning from the homeplace and into HE curricula is an ambitious goal, it is necessary. The prevailing conceptualisation of work-based learning in HE in FE as employability obscures structural barriers and injustices; Gouthro’s emphasis on the need to develop mature students’ critical literacy has revealed how mature students’ lived experiences can be developed so that they resist objectification and understand the systemic nature of social inequality.

The research has significant implications for HE practice, despite English COVID-19 lockdowns ending in 2021. Recent data reveal 38% of UK employees have been engaged in hybrid working (Office for National Statistics 2022), and a survey claims that a third of HE courses are still being taught in a hybrid format (Standley 2023). It seems likely that some paid working and learning at home will continue into the future. For this reason, FECs must carefully consider the provision of support which takes into account learning and work in the homeplace. To halt the very worrying ‘retreat of adults from HE’ (Butcher 2020, p. 7), mature students’ needs must be considered (Mallman & Lee 2016).

Finally, the tide is beginning to turn on the salience of unpaid care, as evidenced by the establishment of the first UN International Day of Care and Support in October 2023 and the publication of counter-narratives which challenge neoliberal modes of thinking (Bunting 2020; Lynch 2022; The Care Collective 2020). By focusing attention on mature students’ own voices, which mostly go unheard in the sector, I hope to influence thinking on the importance of their homeplaces and care work for learning.

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Care-full academia: From autoethnographic narratives to political manifestos for collective action

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Building on sociolinguistic analyses of the speech-act of coming out in relation to sexual or gender identity (for example, Livia & Hall 1997) which explored the identity-declaring and identity-making aspects and the consequences of such an utterance, this paper examines the speech act of 'coming out as a carer' within the academy, whereby workers declare to their professional community that those acts of care which are generally relegated to the private sphere have a bearing on their professional performances. This illocutionary act of self-definition, which radically and problematically breaches the fourth wall of the private-public divide at work, has several important consequences both negative and positive, for the individual carer but also potentially for the institution and its practices. As in the case of coming out in terms of sexuality or gender, this paper takes the position that such illocutionary acts 'have the potential force of altering reality for both the speaker and the listener' (Chirrey 2003). In other words, they have perlocutionary effect.

In this case, taking an autoethnographic approach at first, I examine the cost such a personally and politically radical act has upon the individual carer who thereby publicly puts into question her own professionalism and capacity for excellence in an arena in which excellence is embodied by the old monastic model of the university as once populated by single, male scholars, who, by definition, are free of all such care (Moreau 2016). The personal cost of this breach of the division between public and private, which Hanna Arendt (1958) saw as 'perverse', and correctly articulated to questions of freedom and slavery, appears to be the price of institutional change with regard to carers, and, given the personal cost, is usually undertaken only in extremis and in despair rather than voluntarily.

This paper proposes, as the most effective way of moving beyond the cost-heavy act of individual comings-out, a study of institutional attitudes to such revelations and narratives at their most obvious (although simultaneously most concealed), suggesting that one particularly appropriate arena for such a study might be the academic interview in which normative ideas of excellence are most rigorously and obviously reiterated and reenforced because of the

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structure of the interview and the consequences of the hiring act for the politics and practices of the university, despite institutions' commitments to achieve inclusion, including through hiring practices and attendant strategies for interview practice (see for instance Tulshyan 2024. It proposes that an examination of attitudes towards care self-outing in interview contexts, often acts of explanation regarding non-normative aspects of the vita, might reveal entrenched ideas about care in the institution itself. On such data, more effective strategies of mitigation might be built.

Keywords: *carers; academia; policy; Work-Life Balance; autoethnography; the Post-Confessional; manifestos*

Introduction

Academia as a 'greedy' profession

Borrowing the term from sociologist Catherine Hakim who pioneered preference theory, Sarah-Jane Aiston was the first to characterise academia as a uniquely 'greedy' profession (Aiston 2011, p. 282). Both scholars understood that this had gender implications. Hakim, for her part, had claimed that many professions could be seen as 'greedy', and controversially ascribed specifically women's professional success or otherwise in academia as elsewhere to their individual choices or preferences, claiming that in 'prosperous modern societies, women's preferences become a central determinant of life choices, in particular the choice between an emphasis on activities related to children and family life or an emphasis on employment and competitive activities in the public sphere' (Hakim 2006, p. 286). Hakim further sees the uniqueness of academia as lying in the 'flexibilities' it offers, claiming that '[t]he degree of flexibility that academics have is beyond the wildest dreams of people in the private sector. Academics have far more flexibility than any other profession in the whole of society. It even fits in with the school timetable,' and claims that it is the 'serious sex differential in ambition' (Hakim in Oxford 2008) that poses the impediment to female academic success. Aiston, however, considers academia to be structured in such a way that its particularly acute form of time-greed (what Hakim called flexibility, Aiston sees as the tendency of work to leach into all possible free time) predestines certain categories (and genders) of worker to failure and others (generally men) to success. Whereas for Hakim '[i]n the long run, it is work-centred people who are most likely to survive, and become high achievers, in greedy occupations,' (Hakim 2006, p. 289) as Aiston notes, this ignores three fundamental and intertwined factors (i.e. gender, caring, and time), pointing out that: 'Many women have child-care responsibilities that restrict the time that, by comparison with men, they could devote to academic work' (2011, p. 285). What she claims of child-care, I argue, applies *mutatis mutandis* and *a fortiori* to all support activities in which carers (also predominantly female)[1] are involved. As the term care(r) can prove confusing, here and throughout, I use the Irish Health Service Executive definition of carer as 'someone who is providing an ongoing significant level of care to a person who is in need of care in the home due to illness or disability or frailty' (Health Service Executive, n.d.). She further crucially notes that the unique problem in academic work is the use of research outputs as the ultimate measure of success:

> Any life choices that detract from this 24/7 dedication are seen as the responsibility of the individual to manage. In effect what this means is that men have the opportunity to

[1] Many studies have established that the preponderance of care (both formal and informal) is undertaken by women. For a useful introduction to and overview of the gendered nature of care and its implications, see for example Cancun & Oliker (2000).

> advance their careers by carrying out what in reality is unpaid overtime. Research predominantly takes place in overtime, and it is precisely this activity that contributes towards the prestige of those who undertake it. (Aiston 2011, p. 286).

As a profession which promotes academics based on the fruits of this out-of-hours work, Aiston argues that academia needs to refocus its remedial actions, which as yet largely target the individual, and consider instead its reward economy in which prestige activities favour one gender more than another.[2] If the application of Aiston's claims about women in academia to the situation of carers in academia seems like a leap, we need only consider the empirical data, such as that collected by Family Carers Ireland (2003) and published in their *Analysis of Gender in the State of Caring Survey 2022*, which shows that care is distinctly female gendered. If we add the gendering of care to the gender biases built into neoliberal academia, then the double disadvantage of the female carer in academia should be apparent.

Quoting Benschop and Bruns, Aiston reiterates that:

> It is important not to see women as the problem, lagging behind men and in need of special treatment: 'it is our sincere conviction that it is not women, but the academic organisation that should be the object of remedial programmes'. (2011, p. 288).

If remedial action in academic institutions is largely relegated nowadays to Athena Swan (AS)[3] actions, unfortunately, as recent criticism has pointed out, AS itself replicates rather than addresses the neoliberal system within which these inequalities are embedded. For example, it has been pointed out that the burden of AS activity, which is largely unrewarded and low-prestige academic labour, falls to precisely those categories of staff who are already disadvantaged by the academy's punitive work temporalities. As Yarrow and Johnston (2023) recently found in a detailed analysis of academic staff who had served as AS 'champions':

> While [AS] has been a driver for positive change in several institutions, it is also becoming increasingly clear that the values that AS espouses have been captured as a part of the neoliberal agenda in higher education. AS has become a valuable commodity for institutions to peacock that they are doing the 'right thing'. However, the labor behind the gaining of awards is carried out disproportionately by women, LGBTQA+ people, and others who may also disproportionately be burdened by equality work, while institutions profit from their goodwill and efforts to build institutional reputation and income. (p. 769)

[2] Here we should note that this over-time is not the over-time performed by the most precariously employed within our system. That over-time, while sharing a name, is a different variety. In this case, by over-time, Aiston means the freedom to work and network in those hours when, traditionally, women are performing their non-professional duties, in other words care.

[3] Emanating from the Athena Project spearheaded by the UK Labour government in 1999 with the aim of increasing the number of women involved in the so-called STEMM fields, the initiative led to the creation of SWAN, a Scientific Women's Academic Network. From this network, a charter of principles emerged, and was launched in 2005. The Athena SWAN Charter led to the formation of a multi-institutional group of HEIs whose membership of Athena SWAN bespoke a commitment to gender equality. Part of the success of the Athena SWAN brand can be attributed to its expansion of remit in 2014-15 to include all academic subject areas. As with many UK HE initiatives, it was soon adopted by both Ireland and Australia as a measure and mark of gender equality excellence. The now internationally recognised scheme allows member institutions to benchmark themselves against certain evolving criteria, which self-evaluation is then assessed by national committee resulting in the award of badges of achievement (Bronze, Silver, Gold) both at institutional and unit level. The brand has been criticized as 'a product of neoliberalization within […] academic environments, reflecting the tendency towards accountability, metrics and the performative "doing" of equality work', and as 'moderate feminism in the neoliberal university'. (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2017, p. 1191 & 1193).

The problem here is AS' complicity in gendered neoliberal institutional practices which focus on (and therefore problematise) individuals and their personal situations or narratives rather than on reforming the reward structure of the university itself, or which approach such structural problems through the impacted individuals (who act as AS champions, for example).

This article seeks to critique a specific strand of discourse within such individualising approaches to the problem of inequality in academia, namely autoethnographic accounts of disadvantage and discrimination, and suggesting that the proliferation of such accounts[4] is paradoxically just another manifestation of the larger problem of the neoliberal logic of individualisation (including ideas of individualised success or failure in academia) identified by Benschop and Bruns (2003, p. 207). Whereas other critics of autoethnography (AE) have focused on the various ethical issues involved in such self-revelatory modes, with, for example, Sara Delamont (2009) baldly declaring that 'autoethnography is almost impossible to write and publish ethically' (p. 59), I contend that the problem is that such accounts do not offer the solution to academic injustice they may seem to because their focalisation of problems through the individual replicates the ideology of individualisation of the neoliberalist ethos itself. This is not a rejection of autobiography, but rather a warning against a naïve belief in the transformative political potential of AE. Here I am agreeing to an extent with Donald Shields, who argued in 2000 that AE lacked the authority to shift oppressive power relations. My argument, however, ascribes this shortcoming to the problems that beset the neoliberal life-narrative, as discussed by Leigh Gilmore, which she defines as '[promoting] individual life experiences as examples of a generic humanity and eschew[ing] historical and political analysis or contextualisation' (Gilmore 2017, p. 93). While autoethnographic research is not ahistorical and decontextualised, I argue that its focus on individual life experiences is a cause of political impotence because of its individualised focalisation, which, for all stylistic differences, is the same as that of the self-help narrative.

Mis-framing the question

This research began with what had long seemed to be the author's personal problem: the insoluble yet intractable question of work-life balance (which is, in fact, a masked question about the time and over-time of work), and how this professional scholar might attempt to reconcile two apparently discrete aspects of her existence: the private demands of her impossibly challenging personal life as a long-term carer and her professional being in the public sphere of the university.

However, notwithstanding the proliferation of the language of reconciliation in the discourse on this matter,[5] which suggests that the individual academic can theoretically align the two

[4] The rise of autoethnographic approaches across a number of disciplines from the mid-1990s onwards has been discussed in detail, for example, by Kim (2016). The start of the autoethnographic turn is generally associated with the publication in 1996 of a landmark book edited by Ellis and Bochner (1996) which explored a then experimental approach to ethnographic scholarship in which personal narration is deployed. The volume's introduction sets the tone, consisting of a transcribed dialogue between the two editors in which they describe their new (confessional-autobiographical) ethnographic methodology as 'the kind that helps readers use other people's sorrows and triumphs as a way to reflect on or recontextualise their own, enhancing their capacity to cope with life's contingencies' (p. 28).

[5] Examples of the use of 'reconcile' and all its cognates in the word family abound in the literature of academic work-life balance. See for example 'As defined initially work-life balance means a 'fulfilled life inside and outside paid work'. Some regulations to reconcile the demands of the workplace with a fulfilled life already exist […]'. Notably and more generally, the 15-page European Parliament and Council of the European Union Directive

parts of her life, there is actually no way to resolve this dilemma, since in reality, as Aiston notes, '[a]cademia keeps the public sphere separate from the private one and expects an academic to be willing to cope' (Aiston 2011, p. 285).

What Monroe et al. (2008) call academia's 'cult of individual responsibility' (p. 224) paradoxically seems to predetermine that remedies to the problem of such individualisation begin with individualisation of the problem itself. As such, this article is critically and unhappily autoethnographic in part, requiring a declaration of positionality at its start. But as that declaration personalises a dilemma which is not personal to begin with, let us attempt to resist and subvert the course of that logic with repeated interruptions which address the more general matrix in which this private-public dilemma is embedded.

While recognising the particularly acute conditions prevailing in academia, the question of the academic-carer is, effectively, a rearticulation a fortiori of a much older and more general division affecting the human seen as individual: the public-private caesura is a general schism in the human condition for all labouring animals.[6] While that very ancient distinction between public and private, the polis and the oikos, seems to have been elided in our era of self-exposure through such broadcast technologies as Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, this split has not been resolved. In the era of the corporation,[7] in which the metaphors of embodiment which haunt the anthropocentric imagination have undergone an expansion ad absurdum, the corporate university[8] has adopted a vague sort of stance on the bifurcation of the individual into public and private parts with its lip-service to something called work-life balance. For instance, University College Cork (UCC) avers that it champions a 'healthy work-life balance', continuing:

> You have interests and commitments outside of work and we recognise the importance of flexible work arrangements and wellness in the workplace to help maintain this balance. [E]mployee benefits include generous time off, pension and savings schemes, bike to work scheme and discounted gym membership (UCC 2022).

The idea of a hyphenated thing called work-life balance (often abbreviated in the relevant literature to WLB) has been traced back to Robert Owen's early nineteenth-century idea of a balanced tripartite day of eight hours of work, leisure, and sleep (Marks, Mallet & Skountridaki 2024, p. 200). At its most useful, the term is used to highlight the complex interdependence of what are often imagined as but do not strictly operate as discrete and interlocking spheres of an individual's social experience. Some of the earliest publications to use the phrase 'work-life balance' and to examine it as a unique phenomenon emerged in the 1970s precisely when large

2019/1158 on Work-Life Balance of 20 June 2019 also uses the language of reconciliation no fewer than four times: 'to reconcile family and professional life', 'facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life', 'with a view to fostering the reconciliation of work and private life', 'by facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life'.

[6] Arendt (1958) describes Karl Marx's definition of man as an 'animal laborans'.

[7] The history of the modern corporation stretches back at least to the Middle Ages. See for example Germain Sicard's (1953) tracing of the historic origins of corporations to medieval Toulouse. But in the current age of the corporation, '[b]ehind almost every product and service that we use, aspire to, and fear is a soulless, lifeless, bodiless legal person known as a corporation' (Davoudi, McKenna & Olegario 2018, p.19). Indeed, Colin Mayer (2016) has argued that we are now in a 'sixth age of the corporation […] the most remarkable period of our existence. It is […] a corporation sans machines, sans man, sans money, sans everything' (p. 56)..

[8] The corporate university has been succinctly and damningly defined as the point in the second half of the twentieth century when universities 'no longer collude[d] with big business; they have become increasingly identity to business' (Johnson, Kavanaugh & Mattson 2003, p. 12).

numbers of women were entering the professional workforce,[9] but without, however, absolving women who were making careers from their disproportionate shouldering of domestic duties. Joseph Pleck's 1977 article 'The Work-Family Role System', for example, argued 'the need for greater examination of work and family roles in relation to each other […] to describe how individual; functioning in either of these spheres is affected by their involvement in the other' (p. 417). This complex question, however, of how work intersects with life, has often been reduced, for better or for worse, to what we see in an illustrative chart from University College Dublin (UCD) in which life is imagined as a balanceable set of interconnected[10] demands held in perfect equilibrium by such simple tactics as 'set[ting] boundaries' and 'shorter working year'. Moreover, it suggests that life is not work and vice versa, a claim any carer or person with a disability would immediately dispute.

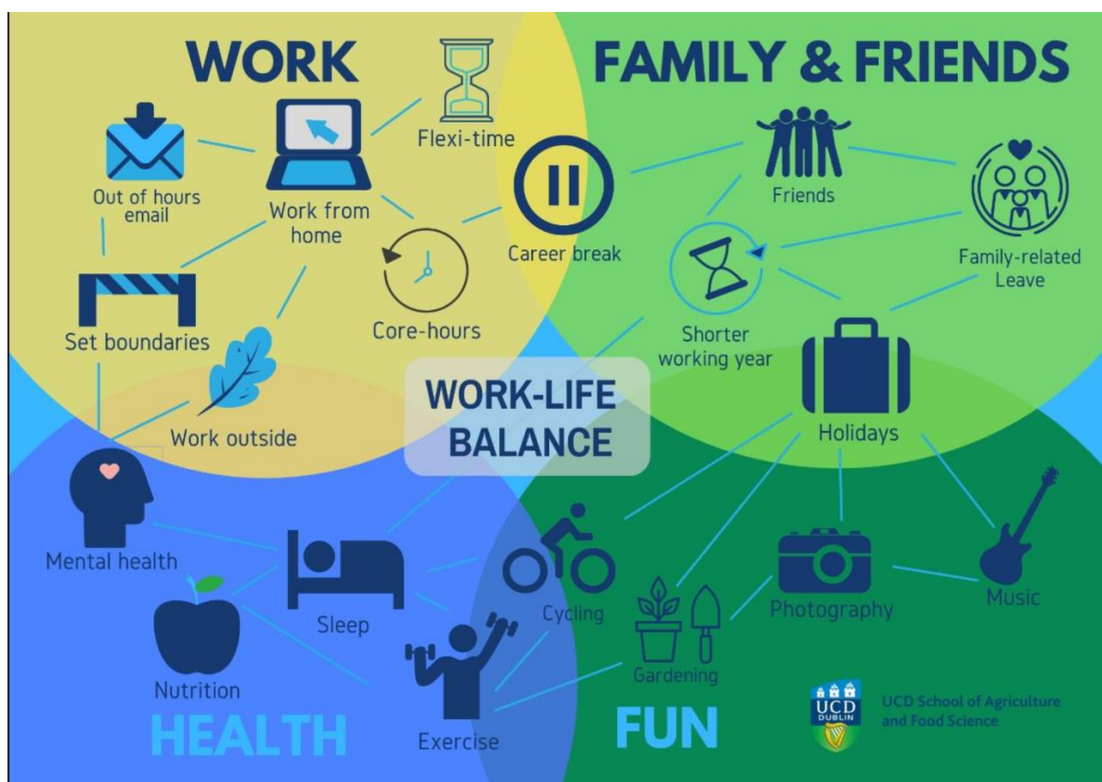

Fig. 1. UCD School of Agriculture and Food Science Work-Life Balance Charter

In these systems, there is no illness, no ageing, no financial concern, no accident, no turbulence, and the hourglass notwithstanding, no actual temporality. A harmless depiction in many ways, but with profound implications for how we think of ourselves as professionals, as workers.[11] This imaginary closed system places the labouring animal in a zero-sum game in which labour and leisure (family, health and fun in this infographic; but presumably also activities like reading, as this is a university infographic) compete for time and attention, with the individual worker deciding (see Hakim's [2000] preference theory approach to professional success) on

[9] For a succinct account of the particular shift in women's labour that occurred in the 1970s, when women increasingly were pursuing higher education and professions, see Sernau (2023).

[10] At least two university human relations websites use the rather literal image of the jigsaw pieces of 'life' and 'work' to represent this intersection (see University of South Florida n.d.; University of Houston Downtown n.d.).

[11] It is interesting to me at least that the bicycle features in many of these infographics on work-life balance, perhaps in some unconscious homage to Vittorio De Sica's 1948 work, *Bicycle Thieves*, which embedded the symbol of the bicycle in our cultural imaginary as a cipher for social advancement through work. The symbol features in both UCC and UCD articulations of WBL, but also in others (see Missouri University of Science and Technology n.d.)

how and whether to apportion time to each area. A still much-quoted 1998 article from the *Harvard Business Review* suggested that this zero-sum view of labour and leisure was slowly being changed by a radical new generation of managers who were rethinking how these two aspects of a worker's existence intermeshed. It claimed that the 'work versus personal life […] zero-sum game' was being rewritten as 'the assumption that work and personal life are not competing priorities but complementary ones' (Friedman, Christensen & DeGroot 1998, p. 119). Of course, this changes nothing, for work still stands over and against leisure, but now work explicitly leaches into leisure time too.

WLB and the demand for confessions

The existence of this mythical beast, the WLB, implying as it does that there is a way to subdivide a 24-hour day into ideal portions, regardless of the situation of the person involved, has not been disputed in the recent critical literature either. As McDonald and Hatcher put it in their introduction to a 2023 edited volume on WLB, this balance is a necessity, albeit one which they concede is 'notoriously hard to achieve' (McDonald & Hatcher 2023, p. 1). They also note of the following chapters an interesting tendency towards an 'auto-ethnographic approach' to the question of balance, in which contributors 'present their own stories in a raw truthfulness that is seldom in career reflections within the academy' (p. 3). There seems to be something about the question of WLB that compels us into confessional mode (see Dillon 2012; Cohen, Duberley & Musson 2009; Izak, Shortt & Case 2002). Aiston, agreeing with German sociologist Ulrich Beck's theory of reflexive modernism, would presumably see this autoethnographic turn as a further symptom of our 'post-industrial society [in which] individuals [are] freed from the constraining and social ordering of industrial society and [encouraged to] see themselves as the centre of their own biographies' (Aiston 2011, p. 281). Although Beck used the term 'individual biography' in the loosest sense (indicating all the ways in which we are forced to imagine that we are authors of our own destinies), the idea of a discursive autobiographicalisation of modern life in the sense of an individual being forced to provide a narrative account of herself (both Catholic confession and the academic cover letter are examples) goes a step further than Beck's idea that 'in the individualised society the individual must […] learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the centre of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography […]' (Beck 1992, p. 135). Here I am extrapolating from Beck's concept and critique of the 'choice biography' with its central premise that individuals forge their own fate, and claiming that neoliberalism does not just make us the authors of our fate in that metaphorical sense, but also in the literal sense that we are additionally forced to narrate it. Just as William Philip (1999) argued that late nineteenth-century biography was an individualising narrative form that provided the language and value systems that 'legitimate[d] the domination of the economy by corporate interests', noting that 'the genre lent itself well to the promotion of individualistic interests' (p. 17), I am claiming that the autoethnographic turn, despite its continued deployment as an instrument of social reform, reinscribes the social structures of neoliberalism, including when harnessed for the purposes of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in academia. Philip had however argued that satirical biography offered some potential for criticism of the economic and ideological status quo. The same might apply to AE as I have argued elsewhere (MagShamhráin 2024).[12]

[12] In this paper, I argue that if autoethnographic accounts are to effect social change, they should be inflected by what Sarah Hagaman (2023) has called the 'post-confessional', a term she uses to describe the deliberately humorous and non-therapeutic approach of *Fleabag* in the eponymous tv series who, while appearing to confess everything 'uses parody and evasion while pretending to share intimate details about herself'. According to Hagaman, while '[t]he

Yet, however reluctant one might be to explore the private-public question of the 'caregiver in academia' auto/biographically, as this article proposes to (in post-confessional mode, at least), I argue that one is driven into confessional or autoethnographic mode by the problem itself.[13] However, as I hope to show, the real political challenge would be to force this question beyond the exposures and concomitant personal liabilities of such account-giving and self-exposure, on the grounds that the slight critical distance introduced by the autoethnographic voice is not enough. These dangers, including the forfeiture of a right to privacy, have haunted that methodology for at least a decade, particularly as many who use this approach are (unsurprisingly) doing so from a personal position of vulnerability (Chang 2016). It has been suggested that collaborative autoethnography offers some group protection from the risks of self-revelation, particularly in professional contexts like the university where specific autonarratives of success (Mazak 2019)[14] are an integral part of the professional persona (Miyahara & Fukao 2022). Chang et al. (2013) posit this as one of the benefits of the collective approach of what they call Critical Autoethnography, or CAE, over the individualisations of AE, claiming that 'in cases of collaborative research teams formed with pre-existing power differentials, it is noticeable that power among researchers is diffused through collaboration. For example, such a shift has been observed in CAE teams made up of professors and graduate students' (p. 26). But, while they claim a levelling of hierarchies within such research groups, how this method offers a non-(self-) exploitative alternative to autoethnographic approaches remains unclear.

The obscenity of self-exposure: Post-confessional anecdote I

For now, let us be uniquely personal: Recently, I have been forced to think more and more about the relationship between my public and private selves, tetrangulated between three households, each in a state of necessity, and the public sphere of my work at the university, thinking being the one luxury of long drives back and forth between [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], as I try to connect the coordinates of my life, spread as they are across all three of these locations. As a result of the tetrangulation, I am neither here nor there, never fully leaving one or arriving at the other, and constantly dreaming about lost luggage and carparks, and missed classes and deadlines. These days, as the life-long carer for [REDACTED], the later-life carer for [REDACTED], and now juggling care for [REDACTED] after a [REDACTED] diagnosis,[15] I am always on the move, and always both looking after someone else while trying against the odds to, if not adopt then project, that rugged success-making self-sufficiency that is idolised, all university EDI and Athena Swan 'peacocking' notwithstanding, by the neoliberal academy. The more tired I have become on the road, the more my ageing and unruly body has continued to insert itself between me and several wonderful potential monographs, the more I have felt the need to confess and explain

confessional mode emphasises authenticity and a desire for healing […] [p]ostconfessions, on the other hand, are a parodical mode of revelation that refuse the authenticity and intimacy elicited by therapy and traditional confessional modes' (p. 650).

[13] Often attributed to David Hayano, who used the term in an article of 1979 which looked at ethnographic research undertaken by members of the group under study, Hayano however makes it clear in his article that he had in fact borrowed the term from a lecture by anthropologist Raymond Firth who used it to describe research conducted by Jomo Kenyata on his own Kikuyu people.

[14] Catherine Mazak (2019) has characterised academic narratives of success as patriarchal discourses which 'prize solitude and glorify family-less-ness'. However, a certain brand of male white academic fatherhood is perfectly compatible with academic stylings of success, and the particularly tricky domain of collegiality which is prized in academia places itself over and against solitude, and can act as an insurmountable barrier to those whose social time is severely circumscribed.

[15] I have removed the previously disclosed facts of my life here as they are simultaneously the facts, experienced from my perspective as a carer, of other people's lives, people who are not practicing autoethnographers. The self-harm potential of AE is always intertwined with the potential of harm to others. As Bochner (2017) pointed out: 'Human beings are relational beings, and thus every story of the self is a story of relations with others' (p. 76).

myself and my many failures at work, because with such a penetrating private life disrupting my public life at work, confession seems the only place left to go. In fact, I did report myself to human relations (HR) once in 2017, happily meeting with bafflement from their side on the basis that complaints to HR can only be accepted from a third-party. Spontaneous confessions of personal shortcomings inhabit a very problematic space in academia, it seems. *Gnothi se auton* may be a fine basis for doing science. *Ekthéste se auton* (expose yourself) is quite another matter.

If we understand Augustine's *Confessions* as the prototype for the kind of self-exposing narrative that this article both reflects upon and engages in, then it is important to note that for Augustine the autobiographic mode involved 'accusation of oneself, praise of God' (Brown 2013, p. 169). If then we have recourse to autoethnographic explorations of one's work-life imbalance, this too must retain traces of accusation and praise. Presumably, accusation of the worker, praise of the work? The second Augustinian assumption is that such narrative self-exposure will result in some redemption. Whatever about Beck's 'choice biographies', AE's claim to political and social transformative power has yet to be substantiated, but it is a core claim about the methodology.[16]

Anecdote II

I was struck by a quote recently while cram-reading a review essay by Shmuel Lederman (2023) on the 'Enduring Radicality of Hannah Arendt' in the *German Studies Review*. I was hurriedly preparing for a botched interview for the position of reviews editorship of the same journal, an interview in which I performed in extreme self-revelatory mode, revealing, perhaps unwisely, that the reason I was so impressed by the reviews section of that publication was that I recently rarely had the time to read a sufficient number of full monographs, and the reviews served as fabulous digests. At any rate, in that particular essay, Samantha Hill, whose biography of Arendt I had of course not read, insists, according to Lederman, on Arendt's 'sharp distinction between the private and public spheres' (p. 146).
According to Lederman:

> Hill suggests that Arendt insisted on this distinction because 'she believed that when we lose the ability to distinguish between private and public life, freedom is restricted, and when freedom is restricted, movement is no longer possible […]'. [W]ithout the separation between the public and the private there is nowhere to move, and a space for movement is the condition of possibility for both freedom and intimacy (p. 146).

If the review essay seemed to contain a warning, it was one I did not heed in the subsequent interview in which I perversely and consistently failed to separate the public and private, narrating unprompted my personal care burden and many academic failures, and leaving myself nowhere to move, which is some achievement for someone who was then and still is driving between 700 and 900 kilometres a week for care purposes. After the interview, with the Lederman quote still in mind, and my own unnecessarily honest performance weighing heavily on me (was it self-sabotage; was it something else?), I wondered whether that compulsively confessional mode was something Arendt had shed light upon when talking about the consequences of blurring the lines between public and private life. And so, I read the original Arendt text in question. As you will see, it did not cure me of confessionalism, but in the case of this article, I think it has helped me to fail slightly better.

[16] See, for example, the claim that '[t]his approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others […] and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, p. 1).

To illustrate more clearly the confusing relationship between the public and private realms, or the households and the university in my case, and the relationship to confessions, I will offer a final personal anecdote in which I repeated the error: I came out as a carer in an email to an all-employees mailing list at my university in 2019. It was an act that bridged the private and public in a deeply problematic way, and I still feel very ambivalent about it, primarily because I used my family as a means to a professional end, entirely without their permission. The reason for this stepping forth from the chorus of workers as a carer and shedding a generally quite pitiless public light on the obscurity of what should be a private part of my life was not entirely clear to me then. It was not the case that I particularly wanted to make a public spectacle of what was private, but rather that I was despairing in my failure to regulate the private part of my life sufficiently to let me perform excellently publicly. I had failed to be promoted, failed at a job interview in [REDACTED] at which I had tried to explain the anomalies in my profile with reference to my private situation and thereby, according to the feedback received, had unnecessarily drawn attention to them. It seemed to me that, due to my unruly private life, my professional behaviour was increasingly looking like a lack of competence and, perhaps more importantly, a lack of that amorphous commodity: collegiality.

Dear All,

Forgive the intrusion.

As some of you may know, [illegible] They are everything to me, and have made me humane in ways that I might otherwise have not been. I am proud of them.

However, the burden of care is often enormous, and comes at great personal and professional cost because institutions do not recognize or cater properly to the needs of carers.

With this in mind, I was thinking of setting up a mutual support group for staff members with significant care duties. If you would like to be involved, I would be very happy to hear from you.

Kind regards,

Rachel

Fig. 2. Coming out as a carer, email

The email in which I came out was perhaps an attempt to make a virtue of necessity in the very sense, it turns out, that Arendt uses these terms in the 'The Public and Private Realm' chapter of her 1958 *The Human Condition*, to which Lederman (2023) was referring, and which gives an account of how human action (and inaction) have been conceptualised through history. As she points out of the pre-modern period:

> [E]xcellence itself, *areté* as the Greeks, *virtus* as the Romans would have called it, has always been assigned to the public realm where one could excel, could distinguish oneself from all others. Every activity performed in public can attain an excellence never matched in privacy; for excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required […]. (p. 48-49).

In this sense, the act of coming out as a carer on an academic emailing list, shows a rudimentary understanding of and crude attempt to bypass that fundamental and ancient distinction whereby, as Arendt puts it:

> Necessity ruled over all activities performed in [the household]. The realm of the polis, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the polis. (p. 30-31).

Rather than mastering the necessities of my unruly home lives as a carer, I had sought to import that necessity into public life, thereby attempting to make a virtue of it. This failure to observe the ancient distinction between public and private is something that Arendt considers a signum of modernity and describes as 'the rise of the social' (p. 68). By such desegregation, the freedom of public life is subjected to the necessity of private life. Arendt calls this new disposition 'society'.

This merger may seem to suggest liberation, at least for those previously enslaved to the hearth and home. And a liberation in the sense that we are free to ignore any distinction between public and private because the private life is now everywhere. Arendt correctly sees this as the age of Rousseau, the author of the first modern autobiography, and master of the literary confession. However, to Arendt it is also to be understood as a 'perversion' whereby society now 'intru[des] upon an innermost region in man which until then had needed no special protection' (p. 39). Moreover, this new state 'excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded [only] from the household' (p. 40). In other words, the tyranny of private necessities had now breached the bulwark and consumed the public sphere, immobilising it. Now action is no longer possible, only that thing called behaviour which can be measured in statistics.

And, lest one imagine, as I did, that the insertion of my private household necessities into the public sphere of my work might somehow serve the demands of EDI by individualising the worker and freeing her from a set of standardised expectations, Arendt notes that, if anything, society (that is the new merged public and private realms) 'expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement' (p. 40). Ironically, then, while swamping the public sphere with the base necessities of the private, society becomes more, not less, conformist.

And, if further evidence of this were needed, wikiHow's drearily predictable guide to being at work suggests that conformity is very much the order of the day: 'by establishing some sensible boundaries [it does not locate these, but they appear to be within the self] exercising self-control and separating your work and home worlds, you can keep your private life private without being considered aloof at work' (Krasny n.d.). It proposes, amongst other strategies, taking a short walk so that you can 'mentally separate these two spheres of your life'. Arendt had noticed the transition in the age of society from the separation of household and public sphere, oikos and polis in ancient Athens, to a modern internalisation of that separation, a state which she expressed as 'Jean-Jacques rebel[ling] against a man called Rousseau,' (p. 39) dividing him into two selves.

Returning to my personal history, the hastily written and even more hastily sent 2019 email to all exchange users at UCC (Fig. 2) similarly proposed two competing versions of myself which finally propose to reconcile into a third semi-political figure: first, the carer who has been humanised by her private care burden; second, a half-private half-public perverse entity who is railing somewhat illogically at the university's non-recognition of carers as a category as though this were the core problem, a thing composed of burdens and costs, probably too tired to think straight, who seems to wish to dump large amounts of dirty carer's laundry at the door of the president's office; and third, a disembodied political voice emerging from that irresolvable dilemma of Rachel versus MagShamhráin, suggesting the need for a mobilisation of the similarly disenfranchised. However, true transition to that state of political mobilisation remains in abeyance to this day. What I mean by inviting people to 'get involved' is still unclear to me.

Un-becoming the story: Leaving the confessional mode behind

In response to the email, a number of colleagues from across the university did get in touch to say that they were this thing I had called carer. However, the diverse nature of those responses revealed immediately a problem of definition. To some, carer meant being a parent, to others it was associated with caring for their now elderly parents, in some sandwich generationers it meant both, while to me and others again, it was associated with disability and/or illnesses, along with all the other facts of life-stages/life-choices care duties, by which I cruelly mean the common-or-garden situation of having children and parents. At the time I had just newly identified my situation both to myself and my professional community as caregiving, and so had never come across what is called 'caregiver identity theory' (see Eifert et al. 2015) which recognises the high degree of variability of situation among 'informal caregivers', an unfortunate collocation that makes the situation sound somehow leisurely and relaxed. The theory recognises that there are:

> Common elements of the caregiver role while acknowledging that for each individual the caregiver role is uniquely defined by cultural and familial experiences. The theory is grounded in the fundamental observation that there is no single generic caregiver role. It also takes into account great diversity among caregivers as to the type and quantity of tasks they undertake and the duration of time over which they serve in this role. (Montgomery & Kosloski 2013, p. 131).

The idea behind this is that more nuanced profiling of caregivers means that supports can be tailored to their different needs. To me, it meant that the first meeting of the university carers group was a disaster. I had imagined that we would immediately identify with one another, and that a clear picture would emerge of the actions needed to gain access to the sunlit academic uplands of work-life balance. Instead, it became something which we later compared to an alcoholics anonymous meeting.[17] We each introduced ourselves and then narrated, often tearfully, our entirely unique care situations and unique sets of pressures this put us under at work, and our many failings to live up to professional standards. What could be extrapolated from all the narratives was the intractable conundrum that the greater the care burden, the more difficult it was to behave 'normatively' at work, but the more pressing the financial concerns were, the more we needed to succeed at work. For reference, in the case of disability, the 2021 INDECON report to the Department of Social Protection on the financial impact of disability

[17] This is not a criticism of AA meetings. We literally sat in a circle, introduced ourselves, and added 'And I am a carer for…' The similarities to AA meetings were interesting.

estimated the cost per person per annum at an average of 11,000 Euro (IDRE, 2021). Multiply this by several family members across half a century. Two main strategies of coping among the people who attended the meeting emerged: say nothing, tell no colleague anything (see the wikiHow suggestion); tell everything, constantly remind people that you are a carer. Which of the two modes a person was in often depended on how near breaking point she or he was. Often the confessional mode was adopted as a later strategy when work arrangements began to break down. In either case, help was contingent upon self-exposure, and self-exposure came at a cost. Once labelled as a carer, the label itself became part of the problem. The help offered often took the form of reducing working hours, relieving people of onerous and therefore prestige-carrying tasks, or the offer of unpaid care leave with its concomitant financial implications. Many felt that caring responsibilities had affected their career progression because they were not viewed as committed enough or reliable.

So, we sat and narrated. And by the end, no clear action was identifiable. The only thing that was clear was that the confessional mode was somehow a symptom of our vulnerability and often perpetuated it, rather than a solution. In a different context, Brandt et al. (2001) had expressed a similar unease at personal disclosures in a work context, noting 'current professional pressures/invitations to […] narrate the personal… We are concerned about some of the uncritical celebration of personal narrative in recent years and the concomitant critical scrutiny given to those of us who do not wish to represent / live the personal in our work' (p. 42). While the push towards personal narratives seems to suggest a valorisation of personal experience, the carer's personal narrative in a professional setting illustrates exactly why Brandt et al. have reservations about this phenomenon. The carer, for instance, tells colleagues about her or his problems, and, graciously and paternalistically, the institution may make allowances, putting the beneficiary of this accommodation into a position of deficit. The carer becomes an exception, allowances have been made, and in the belief that work is a zero-sum game, the assumption is that some other colleague must now bear the burden of that work. The personal narrative has the two-pronged negative effect of singling the worker/academic in question out as a lamentable exception, incapable of proper work, as well as of reinforcing normative ideas of what work and workers are. Worst of all perhaps was the well-meaning advice on self-care, which reinforces the loneliness of the carers who are now being reminded that they are also responsible for themselves.

Explaining their unease at this intrusion of the personal, Brandt et al. add that 'disclosure is less important to me than inclusiveness. […] While many people have been trying to figure out how to get the personal more responsibly into their published work, I have been trying to figure out how responsibly to get it out' (p. 42). Their attitude to autobiographical testimony which they study is that they should be 'dehumanised' to the point that 'the people in my study would not recognise themselves […]. What such disclosures yield and what they contribute to the larger public causes are what count for me' (p. 43).

From self-narration to manifestos

In the final part of this article, I want to suggest a way forward that involves structural change in working practices for everyone in academia so that the carer (as just one individualised example of disadvantage in our particular system) is not the foreign body at work. I have called this universal design for work, riffing on universal design for learning.

Importantly, what the UCD chart on WLB does not show is the amount of time involved in the activities it represents. It suggests with its hour clock, the measurement of our days into

balanced portions, but cleverly avoids any actual amount of time. But we need to remember that in the famously 'greedy' profession of academia, time of work is not nine-to-five clock time, but rather, as a study conducted by John Ziker et al. (2013) found (results which were re-confirmed subsequently), the academic working week is usually a 61-hour week. Of these working hours, many are not spent in the office or in the classroom. The standing joke is: 'The great thing about academia is the flexibility. You can work whatever 80 hours a week you want!' These are reading hours, catch-up hours, hours building relationships within and beyond the institution, hours travelling to archives and conferences and graduations, reading PhDs as extern, organising events, attending the staff party, and constantly going above and beyond. A former colleague once said she knew a woman in academia who had worn out two spouses in the process of progressing her career. A joke, of course, but being an academic on such extortionate terms necessitates outside support. It means being cared for. A carer is generally not cared for. Disabled or ill family members cannot provide that support.

There are many helpful tips out there on how to balance your hours as an academic. Notably, one is always absent: stop rewarding the 61-hour working week. This is what I mean by universal design for working. If we reward excess (and I mean excess rather than excellence), rewarding active participation in multiple committees, PhD supervision to completion, publications, invited talks, externing, and everything that reasonably MUST amount to more than a 40-hour week, then inequality is built into the system, and it is the privilege conferred by time-wealth rather than ability or competence that is rewarded, and the carer always remains in self-reproachful confessional mode.[18]

With this goal in mind, I suggested, following discussion with several brilliant colleagues, the following to the Women in German Studies committee meeting of the 2024 conference in UCC, a manifesto to which members of this and other cognate professional associations are asked to commit for one year in the first instance. This commitment involves:

(1) Collectively, as members of the Women in German Studies or other Association, providing letters of reference, no questions asked, thereby mitigating a lack of socialising, networking time / ability which is crucial to the accumulation of referees[19]
(2) Collectively inviting one another to give keynotes regardless of academic standing, inverting prestige hierarchies
(3) Collectively inviting one another to co-supervise PhDs across career stages and institutions on a 'the more the merrier basis'
(4) Holding anti-conferences with a commitment to hybrid models and other constellations which facilitate inclusion
(5) Refusing to serve on interview panels, selection committees, and similar unless the committee undertakes to rethink markers of prestige which are actually markers of over-time capacity and other privilege[20]

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[18] The author does not wish for one moment to suggest that others are not also equally and more severely disadvantaged by the academic work system. How many professors with disabilities do you know? However, this individual author is a carer. And, as this article attempts in part performatively to deconstruct autoethnographic approaches, the focus here is on her particular experiences.

[19] This was inspired by a senior colleague's recently having to provide twelve references for a certain process. A better suggestion, also considered, might be to abolish letters of reference altogether, but it was unclear how the Women in German Studies Association might effect this broader change without actually disadvantaging those who request letters of reference from us. A flat refusal or boycott would need to be profession-wide.

[20] The open question of what might be more appropriate markers of prestige which do not simply reward time-wealth, I leave to the reader to consider. A way to go about answering the question might be to ask of each such marker: am I rewarding quantity, which is a measure mainly of time-wealth, or quality, which is a measure of ability?

(6) Collectively undertaking to disseminate this manifesto beyond our local subject areas and institutions
(7) Collectively undertaking to identify rewards of time-richness, and to refuse to reward these by strategies as above.

The manifesto is proposed here as an alternative discursive practice to the autoethnographic-confessional mode. Unlike AE, it does not particularise or individualise, although it might of course be inspired by knowledge of and sympathy with particular situations. Its narrative voice is categorically not that of an individual subject, but a chorus. This article also proposes that the manifesto effects change, while the narratives of AE replicate an individualising problem at the heart of neoliberalism. In Teun van Dijk's (2023) discourse analysis of the manifesto, he offers a useful if, to this author's mind, not entirely accurate characterisation of the manifesto:

> Speakers or authors of manifestos generally are collectives, such as social movements in our case, or artistic movements or political parties, even when manifestos may be originally composed by leaders or secretaries. They are published as manifestos of the collective, and not of an individual person. Even though individual authors have published texts they called 'manifestos', they are not so interpreted by the public at large as recipients, but rather as literature, confessions, autobiographies, and so on (p. 116).

While it is patently not the case that single-authored manifestos are generally not understood as such by 'the public' (Luther and Marx come to mind), van Dijk's typology of the manifesto correctly differentiates between collective plurivocal texts (manifestos) and individualised monovocal texts. What one might further add to his discourse analysis is that it is the plurivocality which, in my view, makes the manifesto politically charged in a way that any individualised narrative or collection of individualised narratives cannot be. It is no doubt for this reason that the Care Collective (2021) published its recommendations for care and carers not as a set of arguments based on autoethnographically-individualised confessions, but as a general manifesto. Its undertakings are perhaps not concrete enough for this author, calling as it does for such vague practices as 'promiscuous care' (p. 35). This article offers the open-ended Care in Academia Manifesto above in the same politicised discursive mode.

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The in/visibilisation of education and care: University staff's perceptions of, experiences with, and reaction to the needs of care-giving students

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Research of university students who provide care for an older adult is scarce. Previous studies have so far focused on the perspectives and experiences of caregiving students themselves. This paper takes on a perspective of micropolitics and actor-centred institutionalism, and analyses perceptions of, experiences with, and reactions to the needs of caregiving students by university staff in Germany. Two group discussions with university lecturers and administrative staff were carried out and analysed by qualitative content analysis. Findings exhibit two themes: (1) university staff perceptions of and experiences with caregiving students and matters of invisibility, invisibilisation and helplessness; and (2) university staff reactions to caregiving students' needs in terms of distributed responsibility. We discuss these themes as the micropolitics of stabilising power relations within educational institutions, and contrast them with the experiences of caregiving students themselves. Implications for practice and future research are outlined.

Keywords: *caregiving students; hidden lives; invisibilisation; distributed responsibility; group discussions*

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Introduction

More and more students are confronted with the challenge of combining multiple obligations, from studying to working and caregiving (Ballantyne, Madden & Todd 2009, Wyatt 2011; Moreau & Robertson, 2019). Following Lynch's (2009) encompassing definition of care and caregivers, this may include care to children, parents, friends, and other people, which may not necessarily be blood relatives, but can be relatives by choice. One group in particular that is expected to grow are caregiving students (Wazinski et al., 2022). Caregiving students are adults who are enrolled as students at a university and at the same time provide care to an adult family member or friend.

Even though representative data is still lacking, studies assume that up to one in six students regularly provide informal assistance, care and nursing activities for an adult, such as a family member, neighbour, or friend (for Germany, compare Mindermann, Schattschneider & Busch 2020). This is due to demographic aging, and as a result the need for care is increasing. The main group of older care recipients are the so-called 'old-old' - those older than 80 - and 'increasing life expectancy will lead to a doubling of the share of the old-old between 2015 and 2040' (Naumann & Hess 2021, p. 358). Surprisingly, caregiving students are still an under-researched group. As Knopf and colleagues (2022) showed in a systematic literature review, caregiving students face multiple challenges when trying to reconcile caregiving and studying. This may not only affect their studies, but also their physical and mental health, and financial situation; it can create split loyalties between the care recipient and the university, and lead to what studies frame as 'hidden lives' (Kettel, 2018). This means that often caregiving students do not tell lecturers, university staff, or peer students about their double life, and thus remain invisible in the context of the university (Moreau & Robertson, 2019). As a result, caregiving students receive less support and understanding, feel more estranged from their alma mater, and perform worse in, or even drop out of, their study programme more often than their fellow students who have no care obligations (Kirton et al. 2012; Haugland, Hysing & Sivertsen 2020; Wazinski et al. 2022).

In contrast to caregiving students, young adult carers - that is, people between the ages of 18 and 25 providing care for an adult person - have received more attention in past decades (Becker & Becker, 2008). However, this research has mostly focused on the perspective of the young adult carers. More recently, a few studies have started focusing on the perspectives of professionals working with these young adult carers, including those working in educational institutions (e.g. Leu, Frech & Jung 2018; Nagl-Cupal et al. 2023). Findings show that most professionals share a low level of awareness of young adult carers but are open and willing to engage with them. Reasons for this lack of awareness are identified in an unclear distribution of responsibilities within and across professions and their organisations. This creates uncertainty for action and difficulties in identifying young adult caregivers, as they often do not identify themselves as such. To summarise, these studies show that institutions are not yet sufficiently prepared to cater for the needs of young adult carers and have no clear strategy to support them. Research on university students with caregiving obligations remains even more limited. The few studies that do exist have so far focused on the perspectives and experiences of caregiving students themselves (for an overview of existing studies, see Knopf et al., 2022). While it is important to make the voices of caregiving students heard, such an individualist perspective runs the risk of outplaying systemic conditions that facilitate or hinder the reconciliation of studying and caregiving.

To explore equity in higher education through the lens of student carers, this paper draws on the conceptual framework of micropolitics (Hoyle, 1982; LeChasseur et al. 2016) and actor-centred institutionalism (Scharpf, 1997; Schreurs, 2023). Micropolitics refers to the practices of exercising power through mundane, everyday techniques and how they influence subjectivities, while micropolitical approaches are concerned with the scope of action, and strategies deployed in the conflict of interest between different actors in organisational settings, and the underlying power relations between these actors. Actor-centred institutionalism similarly assumes that perceptions, experiences, knowledge formations, and thus actions of individual actors are influenced by the structures, orientations, practices, and politics of the institutions at which they work. In the case of this paper, this means, for example, that the university environments in which they work and teach effect university lecturers. Their ideas and also behaviour in their role as lecturers are influenced by their work contexts. This also applies to their expectations of how students should act within the university context, and the same applies to administrative personnel at universities. However, they have some leeway and agency to act and reflect within, and even against, their institutions. They can, for example, be more flexible regarding the strictness of deadlines of assignments as well as of compulsory attendance. However, these strategies rely on individual actions and goodwill of specific people and might change with staff fluctuation.

When we focus on university students who provide care, we can thus argue that the micropolitics of universities as institutions plays a crucial role in shaping the environments in which caregiving students study and provide care. The people who constitute the university, such as lecturers and administrative staff, are key in facilitating the reconciliation of caregiving and studying work (or not). Lecturers might be approached by students who cannot participate in seminars or ask for an extension of deadlines. Administrative staff in student counselling in particular will be faced with caregiving students experiencing a range of challenges including mental and/or physical health issues, financial problems, and struggles with finishing their studies.

In this study, we address this gap in the literature and ask two questions:

(1) How do university staff perceive caregiving students and what are their experiences with them?
(2) How do university staff react to the needs of caregiving students and the challenges they are facing?

To approach these questions, we conducted two group discussions with members of university staff in Germany. Based on these findings, the paper makes three main contributions to the literature. Firstly, it sheds light on university staff's perception of, experiences with, and reactions to caregiving students and their needs. Secondly, it thereby helps contrast findings about caregiving students' own experiences with those of staff and thus identifies similarities and differences. Third, it allows us to draw implications for how universities as 'caring organisations' can support increasingly diverse students with multiple obligations.

Data collection and analysis

To approach the questions outlined above, we deployed a qualitative approach and conducted two group discussions with a total of seven participants in May and June 2022. The data collection and analysis was approved by the ethical board of the Goethe University Frankfurt.

Throughout the whole process, strict measures were be upheld to ensure adherence to the ethical guidelines of good scientific conduct, such as principles of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research, while being sensitive and empathic in the interactions with the interviewees. Participants were recruited using a snowball system, and did work at five different universities in Germany. They did not know each other; hence group discussions were not conducted with real-life groups. The group discussions were done online due to restriction of the Covid-19 pandemic using the communication tool Zoom.

While seven participants may seem like a small sample, studies have shown that a small sample can be sufficient for reaching saturation when researching a homogeneous group. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006), for example, found that six to 12 interviews and, respectively, two to three focus group discussions (Guest, Namey & McKenna 2016) can be sufficient to discover all themes that would come up in a larger sample as well, and thus reach thematic saturation.

The group discussion participants were a relatively homogenous group as they were all currently employed at a German university in an administrative and/or teaching position. Five participants were female and two were male. The two groups were furthermore homogeneous in the sense that one group was meant to comprise persons with administrative positions and another to comprise persons with teaching positions. However, it turned out that many among the administrative staff had teaching experience and vice versa, which is typical for German universities. German higher education is organised at the state level and, hence, rather fragmented. It is further characterised by a high selectivity as the probability of entering tertiary education is strongly linked to the parents' socio-economic background (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, students in Germany spend on average six years at university, which is comparably long, and thus tend to be older than their peers in other countries (Luthra & Flashman, 2017).

The discussions followed the same interview guide and content structure that was divided into four broad sections. We started the data collection with a short introduction of the topic of demographic change, increasing care needs, and the reconciliation of care and studying. We pointed out our previous work on the topic and clarified the purpose of the group discussions before informing participants about protection of their data and rights as participants in the project. After participants consented to the recording, we asked broadly whether they had yet had any experiences with caregiving students, and if so, how these experiences had unfolded. We thereby followed a broad definition of care as 'the set of activities by which we act to organise our world, so that we can live in it the best way possible' (Tronto, 2009, p. 14) and its multifaceted dimensions, and let our interview partners find definitions of care for themselves.

We then asked about how they imagined a typical caregiving student to be, letting them guess how many students provide care for an adult at their institution, what kind of care activities they thought were conducted by students, and how much time students spent on caregiving. Following this general discussion about images, stereotypes and beliefs around caregiving students, we asked which challenges this group might face, particularly with regards to the reconciliation of caregiving and studying, and what consequences this might have for student caregivers' present and future lives in the short-, medium- and long-term. In a third section of questions, we presented them with a vignette that differed between the respective group discussions with administrative personnel and teaching staff: Via PowerPoint we displayed the question: 'How would you respond if someone brought grandma or grandpa to class?'. We wanted to know from the teaching staff how they would handle this situation if they encountered caring students in a course they were teaching, and from the administrative staff,

how they would handle caring students approaching them. We asked how far they would accommodate the needs of caregiving students and where they would place limits on supporting them, also considering equality regarding students without care obligations. We then inquired about how they thought caregiving students could be supported, what offers already existed at their institution, and what would be needed, as well as whether they themselves thought they were in a position to provide such support. We concluded with a final round asking what participants would take from the group discussion.

Group discussions were recorded via Zoom and fully transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed drawing on qualitative content analysis according to Graneheim and Lundman (2004). All three authors read the text several times, remaining as open-minded as possible, and openly coded passages. The authors then came together to compare their codes, identify overlaps, and discuss differences in coding. Thereafter, several codes of multiple authors were condensed into broader themes (e.g. challenges in the reconciliation of studying and caregiving, or in/visibility and responsibility). Then, authors conducted another round of coding with the broader themes in mind as 'sensitising concepts', that is, ideas and assumptions that inform data collection and analysis, without providing a definitive, clear-cut hypothesis or definition (Bowen, 2020). This coding was then followed by joint discussions around meta- and sub-codes, and the broader themes initially identified were structured and refined with sub-categories and the relations between them. This inductive process resulted in two main themes that are discussed below.

Findings

The analysis of the group-discussion transcripts exhibits two themes that cut across both groups: (1) University staff perceptions of, and experiences with, caregiving students: invisibility, invisibilisation, and helplessness; and (2) university staff reactions to caregiving students' needs regarding lack of caring university structures.

University staff perceptions of caregiving students: invisibility, invisibilisation, and helplessness

Given that an estimated 10% of university students have caregiving tasks and the various challenges they are facing, the most striking finding from our research is their apparent invisibility to university staff. As one of the participants put it:

> *'... a group that remains very invisible to me ...'* (P1A, administrative staff)

Members of university staff indicated that there is little to no knowledge about or contact with caregiving students among themselves or their colleagues. Often the caregiving is then framed as a 'private problem' that is separate from studying and thus the university is not recognised as a relevant actor in the caregiving process. One lecturer recalls a student whose father passed away during university term. Those who wanted to help did not know what to do, as there are hardly any standardised procedures, and most of the support provided is a result of individual negotiations.

Even if support offers such as counselling services exist, they often target other groups - like students with disabilities - or target mainly employees, not students:

> *'Then just us as a family service, [caring relatives], which we also explicitly ... list. But as I said, ... target group [are] employees'* (P2A, administrative staff)

This situation creates a feeling of helplessness on the part of university staff:

> *'... But yes, I feel similarly helpless as P2L, I remember one student ... we suffered a lot with this student ... and really felt so powerless because we couldn't actually do anything at the moment.'* (P1L, group discussion with lecturers)

To counteract this helplessness it is important, as one participant frames it, to admit that university staff are also overwhelmed by the situation of caregiving students and feel under pressure to offer a solution to every problem that university structures might not account for. This leads to a distribution and individualisation of responsibility on both sides, for both students and staff.

University staff reactions to caregiving students' needs: Distributed responsibility and lack of caring university structures

As outlined, university staff hardly ever knowingly interact with students with caregiving responsibilities. When they are informed about such caregiving, they often do not know what to do, how to support the students, and whether they are responsible for their problems at all. One participating lecturer asked himself how they would react if confronted with the issue:

> *'... what do we actually do then? How do we react to it? How do we deal with it?'* (P5L, group discussion with lecturers)

The helplessness of university staff and the uncertainty of who is responsible for supporting caregiving students raises the question among university staff of how universities as organisations and institutions do and should address the needs of caregiving students. Discussion group participants were aware that it is not supposed to be their individual responsibility to support caregiving students, especially on top of everything else they have to do. Finding a solution that gives the affected student a chance to keep up while also being fair to other students, and additionally managing their own workloads in notoriously understaffed working environments, proves to be challenging for university staff themselves:

> *'Because that's part of everyday work and somehow there is always a time limit, a load limit reached very quickly. ... [There's] always this feeling of, "Ah, that's something on top, I have to do that now, too ... and universities have to regulate so much more than ten years ago" ... so I think ... I at least had to reflect and to say, "Yes, that's okay, that's structural", because that's what happens, right? We all have to do much, much more than we have time for. And still to say now, "Okay ...that's not the person's fault". And to try to really outsource that and to bring it back to a structural level and also to discuss it on a meta-level.'* (P1A, group discussion with administrative staff)

Instead, they understand that university support structures are urgently needed but are not yet existent. When seeking help from universities, they often find no support structures and no clear regulation on how to deal with caregiving students. Such regulations, however, would be needed to really develop the vision of a caring university:

> *'What, in my view, universities ... still need in order to maybe [have] simply an understanding of what, for example, a family-friendly university still means. That it doesn't mean that we can point out where the changing table*

> *is or what offers there are for young mothers and fathers, but that it may have another dimension. To take care of the elderly, for example, right?'* (P3L, group discussion with lecturers)

Depending on their own respective positions and professional roles as administrative staff or lecturers, participants identified different niches through which to support caregiving students, though all of them were on the level of individual negotiation instead of structural reform. For example, one lecturer describes how structural demands actually make it more difficult for them to accommodate caregiving students' needs:

> '*... and there I have to say, the exam has to be passed, the term paper and so on, that all has to be done and we can only just say there is a deadline-extension for the paper or [the person] can postpone an exam. Some also get a writing extension in the exam, but to still have to answer the questions correctly and so on and we can't do much at all at the moment.'* (P2L, group discussion with lecturers)

Often such services are also highly dependent on the engagement of individual persons. Once these people as drivers of services are no longer available (e.g. because they go on leave or leave the university altogether), these offers come to an end:

> *'... that we also cover the area of care, caring relatives, and indeed also offer counselling, which is not taking place at the moment because I am employed as a [substitute] and have not taken over this area and the person I represent, however, normally advises.*' (P2A, group discussion with administrative staff)

Instead of demanding structural reform, many participants therefore resorted to more informal measures, such as awareness-raising:

> *'... and I think these are not such formal, such tangible things which we just said ... "we extend deadlines", and so on, but simply to say, lecturers know about it, and also study program coordination, and so on. Where can you go, where can you refer students, and what can I do with it ...?'* (P5L, group discussion with lecturers)

Discussion

Based on two focus groups with administrative personnel and people holding teaching positions, we explored university staff perceptions of, experiences with, and reactions towards caregiving students. We found that the university staff have limited - if any - knowledge about caregiving students. The latter are perceived as an invisible group within universities - a finding that resonates with accounts of marginalisation, silencing, and misrecognition of certain forms of care in academia. If university staff do have experiences with caregiving students, they report uncertainty about whether they are, in fact, responsible for caregiving students' problems, and experience helplessness in terms of how to deal with the caregiving students' concerns.

Viewing these results through a micropolitical lens, we can understand invisibilisation and the distribution of responsibility as two practices that produce power relations within the institutional contexts of universities. If caregiving students are not visible to university staff,

they do not challenge institutional structures or problematise the archetype of the young, full-time student without care obligations. If no one is clearly responsible for them, their matters of concern are lost in between the institutional structures and mechanisms. Hence, micropolitics in universities aim at maintaining this status through practices of invisibilisation and the distribution of responsibility.
The focus group analysis indicates that invisibility is created through several practices, one of which became particularly relevant in the discussions: the active maintenance of a division between an 'educational life' and a 'private life', performed both on the side of the university staff and on that of the caregiving students. On the one hand, caregiving students put a lot of effort into not bringing their caring positions to the attention of university staff for fear of being treated differently or stigmatised, and also because university staff are not perceived as relevant actors in the 'private problem' of reconciling studies and care work (Kettel 2018; Wazinski et al. 2022). The group discussions also showed that only a few university lecturers and administrative staff actively try to make caregiving visible in their area of responsibility (e.g. through asking about care responsibilities in class or in counselling). Moreover, caregiving students, even if not explicitly excluded, are at least not mentioned in most offers targeted at caregiving relatives and employees. Hence, everything that concerns the daily lives of caregiving students is hidden by structural barriers on the university side, and these hurdles prevent university staff from supporting caring students in their compatibility issues, leading to the 'hidden lives' of the caregiving students (Kettel, 2018; Moreau & Robertson, 2019; Wazinski et al., 2022). Underlying these practices of invisibilisation are life course norms, or chrononormativity (Freeman 2010). This term refers to the fact that societies produce and reproduce certain norms and ideas concerning what age or phase of one's lifetime activities are supposed to occur. The phase of being a student is linked with the expectations of living fairly free of obligations and certainly not being a caregiver. Thus, '[…] in deviating from normative expectations, caregiving students feel ashamed about their situation and try to conceal it from fellow students or university staff' (Wazinski et al. 2022, p. 228).

This finding could lead to the conclusion that awareness raising as a means of visibilisation would be key to improving the situation of caregiving students. However, the micropolitics of invisibilisation are very effective because they are combined with practices of distribution of responsibility that set in after the veil of invisibility is removed. When directly confronted with the sheer number of caregiving students, as well as the challenges they are facing, administrative personnel and lecturers do acknowledge the problem and want to support them in their studies. Yet no one is formally, or feels subjectively, responsible for doing so and no one knows how to provide proper support. There is no clear institutional process with standardised steps that lecturers or administrative staff in universities can take when a student opens up to them about their challenges in reconciling studies and care. Hence, there is a common call for the university as an educational institution to create such processes and assign clear responsibilities to provide such help to caregiving students (e.g. counselling services that lecturers can point their caregiving students towards when they approach them). The dominance of informal arrangements, instead of formalised processes, must also be understood in the context of the chrononormative-orientated figure of the 'bachelor boy' within education institutions (Edwards 1993): This orientation entails that even when academic cultures and legislation change to facilitate the reconciliation of caregiving and studying, such endeavours are rather viewed as a generous 'add-on' instead of 'usualising' and normalising care in academia (Moreau 2016).

These findings are mostly in line with previous research that has focused on the perspective of caregiving students (see for overview Knopf et al. 2022). Caregiving students report that, in

most cases, university staff do not know about their caregiving obligations and that they live a 'hidden life' (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal & Kilkey 2008). They also experience university staff's helplessness and uncertainty in how to support them (Haugland, Hysing & Sivertsen 2020). It seems to be different with fellow students who are less inhibited in addressing the issue. This raises the question of which individuals they may recognise in their private situation and in a university context. As described, caregiving students do 'violate' certain chrononorms and hence often want to hide their double burden of studying and caregiving. This would call for support structures at the university level that allow for potentially anonymous consulting services not involving lecturers. However, caregiving students also say that not only the university as an institution should be responsible for supporting them, but that they 'wish for awareness by lecturers and administrative staff about the challenges of reconciling studying and caregiving' (Wazinski et al. 2022, p. 227). This stands in contrast to what the lecturers and administrative staff reported in the group discussions conducted in the study at hand. They see the support of the caregiving students as the responsibility of the university (i.e. on the organisational level). Reasons for this push of responsibility to the 'higher level are the lack of knowledge in how to help the caregiving students as well as concerns about being unfair towards students with no care obligations if they consider the caregiving students' needs. They wish for clear rules from universities in how to deal with the caregiving students.

Conclusion

This study makes three contributions to the literature: (1) it is the first study to explore university staff knowledge of, and experiences with and towards caregiving students, expanding on previous research that mainly focused on caregiving students as research subjects; (2) it contrasts the university staff perspective with that of caregiving students, allowing us to identify overlaps as well as discrepancies between the two; and (3) it draws implications on how caregiving students can be supported from the perspective of university staff.

When interpreting the results of this study, one must acknowledge several limitations. First, the participants of the focus groups are a small and rather select group, as potential people who already have certain knowledge about caregiving students and thus had higher motivation to participate in the focus groups. Therefore, we may have overestimated the knowledge of university staff about caregiving students. Second, the participants in the focus groups only provide the perspective of university staff and not that of fellow students either with or without care obligations. Third, the results are limited to the German context, and one must be careful when generalising the results for other countries.

Implications for future research can be drawn from these limitations. The study at hand should be replicated with a higher number of participants and groups, as well as with students with no care obligations, to explore their perceptions, experiences, and reactions towards caregiving students. Students with no care obligations are probably the group caregiving students have the most contact with, and hence their perspective should be researched. A further group of interest to interview is university deans, presidents, and others in managerial positions. The study at hand should also be replicated in other countries to test which of the findings can be generalised and which are unique for Germany. Finally, large-scale quantitative surveys in several universities, potentially in several countries, should be conducted with lecturers on their knowledge and attitudes towards caregiving students to explore differences between lecturers' socio-demographic characteristics, as well as faculties and types of universities.

Implications for university management and staff

In addition to the implications for future research, one can also derive recommendations on how universities can support caregiving students.

First, universities must acknowledge that caregiving students exist and realise their needs and challenges. The acknowledgement of caregiving students must happen on all university levels from central management, across faculty management and lecturers, and to the students without care obligations.

Second, universities should raise awareness of caregiving students among all members of the university. Again, this includes the whole university community: presidents, deans, professors, lecturers, administrative staff, and fellow students. Given the diffuse and unclear responsibilities regarding who should support caregiving students, we believe that the implementation of measures to raise awareness for, and support of, caregiving students should be the task of central university management and not be 'out-sourced' to faculties or lecturers. Measures of awareness could include a day focused on caregiving students, surveys among students and lecturers on the topic, and informational brochures. Furthermore, the universities should collect data on the caregiving obligations of their students to assess the share of caregiving students among their student bodies.

Third, existing offers of support and services (e.g. counselling for university staff with care obligations) should be made available to caregiving students. In addition, compulsory attendance as well as students' assignments deadlines could be more flexible for caregiving students. Again, the measures should be implemented by the general university management thus making them available to all students and not only those of engaged lecturers.

Finally, caregiving students often face financial problems as they have limited time to take a student job in addition to their studies and care activities (Knopf et al. 2022). This problem could be mitigated by care-equity scholarships.

As stated, all these measures should be implemented at the university level, and be communicated to all members of the university, and thus achieve the aim of becoming a caring university as part of a caring society. This would allow for mitigation of the helplessness reported by the lecturers in the discussion group. Furthermore, other groups such as students with children or students with disabilities might benefit from the idea and credo of a caring university.

In addition to universities, other societal stakeholders in the areas of care and education (e.g. politicians, companies, public servants, physicians) must acknowledge that caregiving students exist and try to implement measures that increase the possibility of reconciling caregiving and studying.

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Is it simple to be parents in philosophy?
A kitchen table dialogue

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Tillie Olsen (1978) drew attention to an evident, yet underappreciated fact of writing, which is that it takes time: 'Where the claims of creation cannot be primary, the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor effort and accomplishment; silences' (p. 13). Drawing from our experiences as a precariously employed PhD student and a postdoc in philosophy with parenting responsibilities, we want to address this type of silencing in a manner that stylistically corresponds to the exhaustion, lack of time, and lack of leisure experienced by many caregivers in academia. For this, we want to record one of the few occasions in our daily routine where there is sufficient time and mental capacity to reflect on our own situation: the conversation at the kitchen table in the evening when the chores are done. Our contribution consists in a redacted transcription of this conversation for which we propose the term 'autotheoretical dialogue' (see Fournier 2021; Young 1997). Our dialogue covers topics such as: care in relation to class and gender (Lightman & Link 2021); teaching in higher education as a form of care work in contrast to the more prestigious work of research (Cardozo 2017); the precarious working conditions in academia and their relation to parenting (Spina et al. 2022); the ignorance and hostility towards parenthood in academia; the effects of this marginalisation like fatigue, self-doubt, and depression, but also the ambivalence that arises from the conflict of the joy of caring; and the institutional and cultural difficulties of reconciling academic work with parenthood.

Keywords: *parenthood; academia; dialogue; autotheory, care; marginalisation; class*

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We, the authors, are a PhD candidate and postdoc in philosophy situated in Vienna, both coming from working-class families, and parents of a three-year-old child. Our academic work is characterised by precarious temporary employments, scholarship-hopping, and underpaid teaching contracts. In this format, we decided to come together after our daily chores are done and engage in a conversation about philosophy and care. These conversations took place at our kitchen table, as we freely followed Sandra Cisneros' advice 'to write as if you were sitting at your kitchen table with your pajamas on' (Hinojosa 1995, p. 18, cited after Gac-Artigas 2009). The kitchen thus not only represents daily unpaid labour and subjugation to us, but rather a place, where historically those marginalised in philosophy and other academic disciplines often found time to write, think, and read in between their multiple (care-)work responsibilities and where critical, sometimes even 'revolutionary' reflections on the conditions of intellectual production and the joys and sorrows of the 'people making business' were hatched (see Cox and Federici 1975; Schütte-Lihotzky 1927; Gac-Artigas 2009). We recorded the dialogue in three sessions, translated it into English, and made a few edits, mainly adding references and shortening the text. Other than that, we did not make any changes to the dialogue.

EMA: Just tell us how you're feeling at the moment, what's on your mind, etc.

JO: I'm just thinking about the paper we still have to write. That I still have to write my project proposal, ideally in the summer, because otherwise everything will be very tight again and delayed due to the reviews. That I'm tired. That I also have to do sports somewhere in between. That Winnie is ill. And that rat poison was lying around in the kindergarten and now we have to check if he's not poisoned. Stuff like that… I'm glad that we did a lot of laundry today, even if the pile of clothes is still big.

EMA: I would like to put to record that we can have this conversation, because my mother is here, who volunteered to come without us organising, which is great, but also very rare. She came by herself, even though Winnie is sick. I also showed her the heaps of laundry we did today and explained to her that Winnie threw up all over our sheets this morning.

JO: In a beautiful gush of curdled milk. So, thank you to your mother, who is one of the very few people that helps us. It's interesting, of course, that it's the mothers who are helping out and not the fathers. On top of that, my parents don't live close to Vienna, so they can't really help out much. How are you doing?

EMA: I'm pretty tired, I'd actually much rather be lying in bed and sleeping right now. Winnie and I have been spending a lot of time together lately because it's the time between May and June where all these public holidays come up here in Austria, which I never expect and never used to notice. It's winter, the child is sick all the time, then you think you've made it. In March, April he's fine, then there are all these holidays in May and then it's summer. It was really nice to spend time with Winnie, but now I have all the more stress to get something done, which Winnie doesn't understand.

JO: Yes, public holidays are precisely not free, especially with the PhD and the time pressure, precarious employment, etc. These days are not only not free, but actually take time away.

EMA: For me, personally, public holidays are the worst, because every day I have to take off is one day less in the scholarship on which I have done something for the PhD thesis. The scholarship is a unique opportunity for me, the only one I have. It's gotten better, but I remember that in the first two years, every single day I didn't take advantage of, caused panic.

I knew I had this one chance, and it was incredibly stressful to get this funding. Here we could switch to Corona, because with the first scholarship installment, I got the positive pregnancy test, during the first public lockdown.

JO: Really?

EMA: Yes, and right now I have the strong feeling again that it's so nice to be with Winnie, I really long to spend more time with him, but in the last few days, when I've tried to concentrate on my work again and have had to detach myself from him, somehow. And whenever we get into an argument, it's so devastating to think that it was somehow clear from the start that I wouldn't be able to manage it anyway, that it was in vain from the beginning. When I just can't do it anymore, I feel like I shouldn't have tried from the start because it's clear that it can't be done anyway.

JO: You're talking about children and academia.

EMA: Yes, especially as a woman. Sure, having children has worsened your chances, but they were never zero. I knew that statistically it would reduce my chances to zero.

JO: But still, against all odds, you're about to finish your thesis.

EMA: It's not done until it's done. I could still lose it and that's really getting me down at the moment. It's also caused a lot of conflict between us, because I'm so torn about your work. I used to support it unconditionally, but at the moment it really gets me down when I see you correcting the book, because I have the feeling that you already have a lot to show for and I don't know if I'll make it.

JO: Yes, I know that too, somehow. It's a complicated situation. The way we work in academia means we only pull together to a certain extent and ultimately have to negotiate resources against each other. For instance, how much time is left for work, how much has to be invested in care, how much time is otherwise free if you want to relax or sleep. It seems to me that all of this is an overall balance, and in the view of this we are not just allies.

EMA: Yes, we are put in competition with each other. An important realisation for me was that as an individual, you simply can't compete with these structural conditions. There is simply no awareness for the fact that life has to develop and grow. It is pretended that none of this exists. It's not easy to counter this. Also the question of gender and academia: it is so old and deeply rooted in the structures that it seems impossible to deconstruct it on your own, even with the best of intentions.

JO: Speaking of parenthood and academia: the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft/German Research Foundation) considers parenthood to be a form of 'special personal circumstances', including disability, displacement, asylum, illness, caring for sick relatives, etc. (DFG 2022). From the point of view of Germany's largest research funding institution, parenthood is something bad that can happen to you in extreme cases, but it's still a special circumstance, a stroke of fate. But even then, only some of the time is counted. The fact that this counting - how long it takes to get from one career step to another - is perhaps fundamentally problematic is not considered.

EMA: This sentence from one of my mentors, as true as it is, stuck with me: if I don't finish soon, then I'll be too old and will have no chance of getting follow-up funding. The sentence haunts my mind when I'm at the playground with Winnie.

JO: I think the sentence also shows that the structural conditions, such as the fact that parenthood is a massive competitive disadvantage, especially in terms of funding, are already influencing the beliefs of colleagues themselves to a certain extent. It's somewhat ironic, of course, à la: 'We know it's bad, but unfortunately that's just how business works'. But we still engage with these criteria on a daily basis and act in accordance with them. I think that's also one reason why colleagues in academia have an inherent problem with children and parenthood.

EMA: In what way?

JO: It's because they've internalised the structural hostility towards children and parents in academia. Having kids can make it harder to work, and your work might suffer as a result. It's basically seen as a negative thing, a kind of social handicap in academia. That's how it's typically viewed, at least.

EMA: This also has to do with the image that you always have to prove that you belong to the chosen ones, to those who are allowed to do this special work. Especially at the beginning of the PhD, I had the feeling that I didn't deserve it if I didn't dedicate all my time to it. This was also reinforced by my friends in academia back then. But it goes beyond children: everything you do 'besides' your academic work is judged.

JO: I think this is also related to this old *topos* in European philosophy, very prominent with Nietzsche, for example: getting pregnant with the work. It's terribly misogynistic in the end, and it's pretty obvious that there's some birth envy going on. Perhaps European philosophy simply has a fundamental problem when it comes to life, creation, and growth. Maybe that's why it's so hostile when it comes to this form of physical creation.

II

EMA: We have what I would call 'educational stress' with our child. Winnie is three now and, thanks to our intensified efforts, he was already able to read the alphabet and some words. Now I've been away, he has forgotten a lot. This stresses me out, because of course I feel like he has to reproduce our educational progress.

JO: It is clear that the head-start you can give when you have a concept that education is the only exit option to the confinement of class is absolutely central to the child's educational success. Ultimately, this is the only way to pass on the educational and thus class advancement to the next generation. But I think we also have an advantage in that we can reflect on this conceptually due to our work. If it were an educational advancement in a different context, I think it would be implicitly clear what needs to be done, if only from personal experience. But since we deal with it theoretically, the structures are more present and clearer, the mechanisms more transparent and therefore easier to attack and exploit.

EMA: It's like the gender issue: I teach feminist theory, but on a personal level and in everyday life, I haven't managed it any better than any other couple in our circle of acquaintances, which

consists of mainly liberal or leftist feminists. They all describe the same problem: they fall back into traditional role divisions as soon as they have children.

JO: It didn't take long for me to realise that you don't bring up a child on your own, many other institutions and people are involved. It becomes a mélange.

EMA: There is also no knowledge of how children are wired, what phase of defiance means, how they process things and see the world, why they throw cups on the floor, etc.

JO: These are things that you have to learn and that require an educational effort. But there's no time for that either. I've noticed how relaxed it is when your mother is here, one more person doing care work. It's not like you're hosting a guest or a friend that you don't want to burden, but there's a consensus that you can hand over, there's an implicit agreement that everyone will look after the child a little. It's easy with a child when there's three people taking care.

EMA: Everyone takes on a small task, one cooks, the other wipes Winnie's mouth, the third makes the bed. In between, I also worked a bit on my thesis.

JO: This also includes the topic of mental load. Today, for example, I just cooked without worrying about the fact that I'm short on time because Winnie has to be cleaned and you still need time to write and so on. It's an incredible relief to have someone there who can do that for you. But you're still constantly doing something, you're working and reproducing all the time. But you only think about two things at a time and not five when there's one more person around.

EMA: It was back and forth for me today. I'm currently at a point in my thesis where I'm explaining what time is. Every PhD student in philosophy probably comes to this point where they have to explain what time is. Incredibly difficult, I had to focus, but Winnie is so clingy right now that he comes in every ten minutes and cries, 'Mommy!' I had two hours, had to make lunch too, two different menus because I don't know if he's eating tomato sauce today or not. I like doing that and I'm happy when he's actually eating in the end. But you have to keep it all in your head and the thought rattles in the background: 'What's time for Aristotle?'

JO: When a child eats the food you cook, it's incredibly beautiful. This feeding job, the first job you do with a child. Sleep, nutrition, security. If it all goes well and he eats the food, maybe something healthy even: That's great, an incredibly nice feeling. It's just nice when you can feed people.

EMA: I don't think I'll ever manage to harmonise these roles. Right now, I have the feeling that I want to give up my PhD, I still want something from normal life, to go to the movies, and so on. Today, for example, I was with Winnie all day. I actually just want to be there for him, dawdle as much as he wants. I also have the feeling that we both achieve a lot on these days and that he remembers them for a long time. Two days later, however, I feel that I also want to create something beyond that, because at some point he will be moving out and then I want to have something that is mine.

JO: My impression is that he actually requires an unlimited amount of time, it could all go indefinitely, another game and another, and another question about why and so on. He can fill all the time he is awake, which is about ten to 12 hours a day, with play and questions, which means potentially ten to 12 hours of care work just with Winnie. Not including laundry,

cooking, grocery shopping, etc. It seems like children are designed to soak up as much time and attention as possible so they can learn as much as they can. It is therefore very difficult to make a cut. This is also a question of resources, either you allocate the resource of time to him or to the academic job.

EMA: He also notices immediately when ‘we’re down to the wire’. And that also feels totally wrong as a parent. But it feels just as wrong not to work on my things. When I sit in the library and read, it actually feels right, what feels wrong is the pressure and stress of no longer belonging if you don’t do enough in a day.

JO: For me, that’s one of the clearest gender differences. It was relatively clear to me from the beginning that having a child would only work well if I felt that I also had time for my own things. It was clear to me that it wouldn’t work if I only did care work. As you mentioned, he’ll eventually move out, so I always saw it as an overall balance and had fewer issues with pulling resources away from him, as I felt that it was necessary, insofar it is a long-term project. If I only invest in Winnie for 20 years or longer and burn out, it won’t help anyone.

EMA: Yes, I have that feeling too. But on the other hand, I also feel that it’s totally wrong to take resources away from him. I don’t know exactly why. Perhaps for traditional reasons. I’ve always had the very strong feeling that I can think and write well and that’s what I want to do. It’s always hard to defend that and there’s also a gender aspect to it. It’s just not socially expected for a girl of my class. It wasn’t planned for either of us, but for me it’s always a luxury: it’s nice if you do it, but it’s a bonus, you have to earn it. That’s one side of it. The other side is this: Winnie simply needs a lot of time and attention. And I enjoy that with him too. It’s not that philosophy gives me so little, but this academic business only takes and never gives. A day at the movies with him is actually a lot more philosophical than many conferences.

JO: That's a tough question: why do we go along with all this nonsense? The current state of academia is, quite frankly, a mess (Oßwald 2024). It’s unattractive in every respect, it makes you sick, it sucks and it’s stupid. So why all this?

EMA: Yes, against life.

JO: There’s nothing good about it. Even what was fun in the beginning, teaching, for example, becomes a burden because of how it is organised. There’s not enough time, not enough money, and too many students, for example. But why though? Why are we doing academic philosophy? The only answer I have found for myself is that it allows me to write. But in fact, that’s not true at all! We write proposals, articles, for which we have to clear our evenings, but it’s not part of my normal daily routine. You have to do so many other things in order to do what it’s actually about, philosophy in our case. The balance just isn’t right anymore. So why are we doing this, why don’t we just stop? Prestige plays a part in it, certainly, and a form of competition or gamification; it’s also about having made it, despite all the adversity.

EMA: I think there are many bad reasons, but many good ones, too. That's why I always ask the students at the beginning of a course: Why did you start studying philosophy? Everyone has a very good reason, a calling.[1]

III

JO: What were your good reasons?

EMA: A fellow student once asked me this and immediately got upset: 'Most people don't even know the answer to this question!' I didn't have an answer either.

JO: What were the bad ones?

EMA: The bad ones are that it was imposed on me by my family because they couldn't do it themselves. It was what they thought would bring them the most prestige.

JO: That reminds me of Tom Waits: 'I'm gonna take the sins of my father…'

EMA: Of my grandmother in that case. Those were the bad reasons. I also struggled for a long time with the fact that I chose my studies for the wrong reasons, because I would actually have preferred to study biology.

JO: That's interesting, biology is not necessarily the most prestigious discipline.

EMA: But what were the good reasons? It's just that I wanted to understand things that are not immediately useful, that don't lead anywhere, where you don't know whether it will help. For example, time: I really want to understand what Aristotle thinks about time.

JO: So a kind of sporting ambition.

EMA: Yes, just like Winnie: to catch his interest, it has to be difficult.

JO: I find that relatable. At school, it only ever became interesting where it wasn't clear what the answer was, where it became speculative. And in philosophy it doesn't cost anything, you just have to sit down and read, that would actually be very democratic. Sitting down and reading is a nice thing. I started studying something else, originally physics and other things. The problem was that I had no idea what studying was like, I assumed it would be similar to school. As it turned out, it wasn't quite like that.

EMA: What was the difference?

JO: As I had no role model - no one in my family had studied - I thought that you just do what's in the curriculum and you're good. But that's not quite the case. Ultimately, you have to plan what you need for what and make the necessary changes. In any case, there was the problem

[1] 'Where letters and the sciences are concerned, on the other hand, the usual outlets – teaching, research-work, and a variety of ill-defined careers – are of quite a different character. The student who chooses them does not say goodbye to the world of childhood: on the contrary, he hopes to remain behind in it. (…) Their splendours reside, as do also their miseries, in their being a refuge, on the one hand, or a mission, on the other.' Lévi-Strauss 1961, p. 58.

that it was clear that I wouldn't stay within the standard period of study and that the state student grant (BAFÖG) would only cover the standard period of study. The mathematics was pretty simple: it'd probably take another two or three semesters, and I had to figure out how to pay for it. Then there's also the Master's degree to be done. That's why I decided to change my field of study quite early on.

EMA: I understand, that was a financial decision. Very good, we were just talking about a calling.

JO: I then enrolled in environmental sciences because it gave me the opportunity to integrate all kinds of disciplines. That's when I realised that I could do a relatively wide range of things apart from the actual study program. So I tried it out and sat in on all kinds of lectures. That was incredibly liberating. But at some point, I had to get a degree, which I did in environmental sciences. In my Bachelor's thesis, I also worked somewhat historically, as it was about a field that hadn't really been paradigmatised yet. In the end, the actual subject of the thesis was relatively uninteresting for me, what was much more interesting was the work on the history of science, because it opened up a dimension on science that I simply didn't know before. It also caused a certain skepticism, especially with regard to the ideas of scientific progress. In any case, I wanted to continue in the direction of the history and philosophy of science. In Vienna, there was this possibility at the time, even for people from other disciplines than history or philosophy. In Vienna, everything was a little freer at that time, so a lot of things opened up. At some point, Deleuze came along and that simply interested me. Then Foucault came along and that's how I ended up writing my doctoral thesis, a chain of new interests that I pursued. So there wasn't really an original question, it was more a case of moving from one unsolved problem to the next.

EMA: Had you thought about having children then?

JO: Not at all.

EMA: Was that never a question?

JO: It was categorically out of question.

EMA: When was it a question?

JO: By the end of my twenties it became an issue.

EMA: Why?

JO: I suppose it's because I've gotten older. In my twenties, I took care of myself all the time, without it having done me much good. It still took that time. By the end of my twenties, I had the capacity to take care of other people. I first had to find my way around in the academic world, also because at that time I still had no concept of class difference, I couldn't understand why everything was so difficult, I had no idea about class transitions.

EMA: Yes, that's why it is so hard.

JO: It was always a struggle, everything was harder than with others. But why?

EMA: I used to think it was all about intelligence, I thought it was all about who was the cleverest, the most talented.

JO: It didn't take long for me to figure out that either I'm completely stupid or there's something else that causes all these subtle problems. But I had no idea what it was. That only really came with the PhD. Before that, you just deal with it in a way that's become routine. You know you're annoying people, but you don't know why. It was only during the course of my PhD that I gained the distance and maturity to look back on such things, which are very shameful.

EMA: And that you can afford it because you already have a degree.

JO: I found the distance important. The bourgeois colleagues are basically constantly cutting you down and correcting you. They do it without even realising it, it's a social automatism. It takes time before you stop taking it so personally and start to understand what's happening and why. As I said, the important thing was the concept of class transition, *les transclasses* as Jaquet (2014) calls it.

EMA: But despite all the criticism, you can also see what identity politics can do, how important it is.

JO: For me, it's more about the concept, the power of the concept. These means of thinking are simply essential, and that's what I was missing in my twenties, a concept of who I am. Everything always depended on the individual, there was no idea of structural dimensions.

EMA: But you didn't think about children in your twenties? Why? I know how we met, you were always talking about babies. And that convinced me. I never wanted to have children.

JO: I don't know, it just happened. From the moment I felt that I no longer had to take care of myself, that I was out of the woods. My family is also quite large, like many working-class families. I didn't think it had to be that way, but the hurdle isn't that big. When you grow up with lots of kids your age, it's just normal. I think that's one of the nice things about us 'Prolos' ('proles'): our relaxed relationship to children.

EMA: It's not about the ideal moment, they just pop up without you being able to control it, then you just take them with you, for better or worse.

JO: Sometimes that doesn't work out so well either.

EMA: Yeah, sure.

JO: I think it's a nice approach not to plan it down to the last detail. This idea is mainly about inheritance. In the other case, the children are more or less on their own, it's an event that happens and they're just there, but it's not as if they have to carry on everything. Of course, it was always an issue with my partners at the time, but I was really annoyed by the planning discussion, I think it's so stupid: first this has to happen, then that has to happen and then... I mean, in retrospect it makes perfect sense!

EMA: I only knew from my own environment that it 'just happens'.

JO: The *proles*, the offspring.

IV

JO: Raising children is probably always very complicated. We've also seen an unexpected drop in birth rates across the globe for some time now (GBD 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators 2024). What is the situation now in academia and in academic philosophy in particular?

EMA: I was still thinking about the Olsen text on Silences (1978, p. 19-21). What I found very inspiring about it was the biography of Olsen herself. She embodies many of the things she writes about, in that she had no opportunity to work in literature until she received a scholarship. This fits with what we have already discussed. Scholarships are very often an essential part of class transitions. Olsen then gave her child to relatives to have time to write, but in the end, she rather broke off the scholarship.

JO: Did she have a partner?

EMA: Yes, he was an unionist.

JO: Did he take care of the children?

EMA: I think she doesn't write about that. What's also important about Olsen is that she is one of the few who lists the conditions of writing, such as having silence, having helpers, usually wives, who make writing possible. All of this is diametrically opposed to the conditions of making humans. I think Fraser calls it that, the 'people making work' (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser 2019, p. 68), I find it a very useful term. According to Olsen, one of the conditions of writing is 'the flow of daily life made easy and noiseless' (p. 12). For example, she writes about Rilke not even going to his daughter's wedding, and that he considered this to be completely justified. Olsen presents it in such a way that you think, 'What an asshole', but surprisingly she then says that he simply did what was necessary to maintain his creative power (pp. 15-16).

JO: But she still wrote books.

EMA: Yes, but she probably could have produced more. But when she writes about Woolf, she also asks herself whether Woolf is not also mourning what she did not have, children, for example (see Olsen 1978, p. 200). There seems to be a kind of mourning on both sides, the mourning for the books that were not written and the mourning for the children that were not born.

JO: I wonder how we should understand the conditions of production. On the one hand, the examples that Olsen lists are all from the 19th century. On the other hand, it is not so clear for what kind of production they are the conditions for - is it about any kind of writing or about producing so-called world literature?

EMA: Olsen says that women often turn to the so-called minor genres (Olsen 1978, p. 10) because they lack time. Nursery rhymes, jokes or short texts, because they can be written down quickly.

JO: But then the canon is the problem.

EMA: I think what she means is that there is something rotten in the idea we have of the author. The great writer who is freed from the noise of the world, who is only absorbed in 'his' work. That is a bad image, this cult of genius, that is how I would understand Olsen.

JO: What's interesting is that Olsen is looking for the conditions of writing, but at the same time she's deconstructing the type of writer associated with it. This type is very peculiar, and not terribly desirable, in my opinion. It also has something very alienated about it, reminiscent of the highly specialised, repetitive work in a factory, also in isolation and compartmentalisation.

EMA: On the other hand, we also know that when we sit down to write a text, it is good to have a lot of time at a stretch. The theme of helpers is also relevant today, if we think of global care chains, which, as Federici (2016) says, are proof that the problem of care work has still not been solved. What the poet's wife used to do is now done by the domestic worker. A good example is perhaps Rachel Cusk, who writes in 'A Life's Work' about how she had a baby while she was a writer. She is not blowing the horn of 'Regretting Motherhood', which is also a valid perspective. Cusk's position is however consistently ambivalent and therefore more interesting, I think. There is a scene in which she describes how difficult it is to combine authorship with having a child, losing contacts, not having enough time. She decides to hire a babysitter and is dissatisfied with one applicant after another. One of them, a woman called Rosa, who she then fires, calls her a horrible, privileged woman who only pays slave wages (Cusk 2001, p. 242). And she sees it that way herself, she can simply afford to pay someone to look after the child.

JO: What Olsen analyses is the status quo. Under the prevailing circumstances, this and that must be given so that one can write. What I am not sure about is the question - what is Olsen's own position on this? The problem is that the nexus of parenthood/philosophy or parenthood/writing is connected to a whole range of other things: relations of production and reproduction, power relations, ideological relations, etc. The aforementioned birth envy of philosophers and the idea of becoming pregnant with a work is, from this point of view, a very peculiar idea. In any case, I have the impression that the problem of writing, as we have considered it with Olsen, also calls into question the status of philosophy as an academic discipline, as a form of professionalised writing.

EMA: In what way?

JO: I wonder whether it is a good idea to professionalise philosophy as an academic discipline or intellectual work in general. You know the famous passage from Marx that strikes a chord with me: in the association of free people, there would be the possibility of doing this today, that tomorrow, hunting in the morning, then fishing, and criticising after dinner (Marx 1969, p. 33). I don't necessarily have to hunt or fish, but I find the idea that everyone contributes to the vital work, so that everyone can also have a share in the intellectual work, is thoroughly worthy of support.

EMA: But the care aspect would still have to be incorporated. Although didn't Marx take good care of his daughters?

JO: I think he took care of them as well as any man of his century, no more and no less. But maybe I'm wrong.

EMA: But yes, exactly that plus care work. We should align the whole production process, material and immaterial, everything that is done as a profession or wage labor, more with the conditions of life.

JO: Yes, I fully agree. It's clear that the way we organise ourselves undermines living conditions at every level. Not only do we as a species undermine the relationship with the rest of nature in the sense of the sometimes rather shallow discourse of anti-anthropocentrism, but also within the species, since we also undermine our own reproduction.

EMA: It is obvious that current working conditions are not geared towards children and parents. This becomes especially clear in academia. Not only the extreme pressure to publish, which is also starting earlier and earlier, the artificially-created competition, the additional tasks such as administration, 'service to the community', etc. Or the fact that stays abroad are expected as a matter of course. Faßmann (Education Minister of Austria at the time) also emphasised at the scholarship award ceremony that you simply wouldn't have a chance to survive in academia without this experience abroad. That was at an award ceremony, which had been postponed for two years due to Covid. Winnie was there because we had no one to look after him.

JO: Sometimes I get the feeling that the topic of studying abroad is a special fetish of the German-speaking world. In any case, it has completely gone off the rails, especially when you consider the huge social effects that result from it.

EMA: But I'm now completing the foreign scholarship, as I play by the rules. And as we said last time, it's hard to combine that with care. After half a year, it just tears you apart, it messes up your routine at home. And it only works because we manage it in a half-hearted way, moving abroad with the child for six months, the price is usually too high.

JO: Apart from time pressure and reproduction, there are other filters that exclude parents and especially mothers: the pressure to publish, experience abroad, and ultimately all the things that academia is so sick of.

EMA: Yes, the system is designed for mobile single men.

JO: Who are mentally stable, healthy, who don't need any social contacts, and change countries or continents every few years. A very special idea. Maybe it also has to do with the image you mentioned earlier. This immersion in writing and the subordination of everything and everyone to it. This figure is very romantic, the cliché of the artist, and also very old. But strangely enough, it is also perfectly suited to being exploited in a way that has never been seen before, because writing, in our case academic philosophy, is a kind of lifestyle. Employee rights are, of course, ridiculous in the face of this. That is to say, perhaps there is also a very direct interest in maintaining this form of subjectification, however unsustainable it may be, simply because it is ideally suited to squeezing even more work out of the day. A romantic figure that fits perfectly with neoliberal exploitation mechanisms.

EMA: That's what I wanted to emphasise earlier: this 'the flow of life made easy and noiseless'. These 'special circumstances, children, illness or jobs to pay the rent. We once had an event in the doctoral program, the so-called 'Pragmatic Academic' series. It was about designing CVs. The only question that remained unanswered was how to deal with gaps in the CV due to mental health issues. Maternity leave and motherhood, it was said, were great advantages -

absurdly, I hear that all the time. As for the author figure you mentioned, it's also important that there is no additional income, no bread-and-butter job. Many of our colleagues, for example, have been doing proofreading on the side, which is not far-fetched for philosophers, especially since external teaching is difficult to make a living from. Many however considered them to have 'failed' in academia - one minimal deviation and you're out, so to speak. This also shows what a bourgeois endeavour academic philosophy is.

JO: And incredibly uncritical. All the things that lead to these 'failed' careers or biographies, such as the fact that there are far too few jobs, that everything is precarious, that there is no non-professorial tenured staff anymore, all this is part of a process that has been going on since the 1970s and that has fallen on very fertile ground in academia, since there is hardly any union organisation here and there is therefore little resistance to the deterioration of working conditions. There are countless examples of how union organisation and traditional industrial action are effective. The fact that this figure, as we have discussed, is so powerful due to these circumstances is completely ignored.

EMA: Yes, everything is negotiated at the individual rather than the structural level.

JO: Exactly, it's your own achievement or your own failure. But it's also important to see that these connections are also co-produced by those who suffer from them. That's the strange thing about it, we reproduce it at every level, subjecting ourselves to the evaluation criteria of 'good' science, accepting these idiotic publication hierarchies with good and bad journals, good and bad publishers, etc. We're all in on it! The problem is that we think we're only doing it 'ironically', as if we didn't really mean it. So, from a business perspective, it's something we have to do, even though we'd prefer to focus on philosophy and not get bogged down in the nitty-gritty of the world. I think we overestimate ourselves. As long as we reproduce these practices, it doesn't matter if we really mean it. The effect remains the same, whether we believe in it or not.

EMA: On the other hand, it's true that if you participate, it creates conditions in which you can work well. However, it is strange that continuity in one's biography is valued so highly. How is that supposed to be possible with fixed-term contracts of three to four years?

JO: Today I received an email offering me a fixed-term teaching position. The email also said that I should find out about any additional income limits if I wanted to combine the teaching position with unemployment benefits. This means that the university is perfectly aware that this is normal for many people, a now-normal life and work model. On the one hand, it's a step in the right direction, at least they're no longer closing their eyes to it. On the other hand, it's also very typical of academic philosophy how uncritically it is simply accepted. It's just taken for granted on both sides: there are people who get unemployment benefit or social security and teach at our institute. And then in such a bureaucratically brutal way: Please make sure that we as a university have no problems with this, yes, thank you. In any case, precariousness is an integral part of teaching and research at universities and is no longer denied by them.

EMA: How nice of them. But let's go back to this author figure: I have the impression that it is very old and firmly anchored in philosophy. There are only a few exceptions, Aristotle is one, Spinoza too, who was a lens grinder by profession. But those are exceptions. Another example would be Kierkegaard, who inherited from the father he hated.

JO: Yes, the image is probably much older than that. I was thinking of the cliché of the consumptive writer who somehow pours the last pages of his life's work into a novel with his last ounce of strength and wastes away at the age of 35.

EMA: So Novalis is to blame for everything?[2]

JO: That's exactly how it is.

V

JO: Writing and publishing are just one part of academic philosophy, most also teach, although the importance of teaching for a career is secondary. The only thing that counts is publishing, teaching is just a sideline. This naturally suggests a parallel with care work, in the sense of teaching as a necessary but marginalised reproductive activity in the academic field, as opposed to publishing and research as prestigious, 'productive' work (Cardozo 2017). And it's not just the structure or organisation of the academic field, there are also other aspects that are surprisingly similar. For example, the affective investment, in that we deal with people in teaching, which also means that we have relationships, and the resulting difficulties of pulling out, setting boundaries in terms of working hours. You realise that you're always doing too little, the students always need more supervision and discussion than you can provide. As in care work, teaching, at least for us precariously-employed people, is hardly financially recognised; the salary is ridiculously low, but for money nobody does it anyway. But it's also fun to share knowledge and to see how much joy students get from doing philosophy. It's also incredibly satisfying to see how a person's thinking and writing develops. All of this is very similar to care work.

EMA: Yes, also because there is a growth, especially in philosophy, where it is not only about factual knowledge. You can see that it liberates people, these one-and-a-half hours where they are in a room that is a bit freed from the usual rules: We are doing something useless here and nobody can stop us. That is a great freedom.

JO: But very fundamental transformations also happen, because these are very young people, in their early twenties. They may be thinking about certain things for the first time. School cannot teach something like that as an institution that is epistemically, politically, power-theoretically and organisationally very much part of the 19th century. On the other hand, it may simply not have been possible to think certain things before, simply because of the level of maturity. It's not just about the grand ontological or cosmological questions, for example, Foucault was a shattering experience for me in the best sense of the word. A transformative experience, in that afterwards you not only see things differently, but also live differently. You open up new areas of thought and ways of thinking that were simply not possible before. It's incredibly exciting to be there, also in terms of the increase in power or potentiality in the Spinozist sense that the students undergo.

[2] In our conversation, we referred to the German Romantic poet Friedrich von Hardenberg, who chose the pseudonym Novalis, as he seems to be the perfect example of the aristocratic dandy-like poet exclusively committed to his work (who also tragically died at a very young age). Surprisingly though, he was also a successful and pragmatic businessman who, only in his twenties, became assessor and director of the salt mines in Weissenfels.

EMA: But it's true: it's not seen as that important and, as you know, there are many colleagues who can't see the point of teaching at all, but just look down on the students, like 'prove to me that you're even worth reading your seminar papers.

JO: Yes, that's not uncommon. The grading and the pressure to grade is also unspeakable and ultimately hinders development. It also shows how much we are still trapped in the schools of the 19th century, as if these grades had some meaning beyond the necessities of the bureaucratic apparatus. As if the abilities and developments of students could somehow be objectively measured, especially when it comes to producing text. For example, isn't it much more impressive and a greater achievement when a student improves their writing by several levels in a seminar than a good piece of work by someone who - for whatever reason - can already write well? I think there is simply a lack of obvious principles for objectifying performance in a course.

EMA: I would like to talk about autotheory (Fournier 2021, p. 7; Young 1997, p. 62; see also Wallraven 2007). Because it's not just about mixing personal experiences with theoretical elements, but also about reflecting on how a theory has influenced your own life or helped you to interpret your own circumstances, such as parenthood. We had already talked briefly about this, for example about gender roles and the knowledge of how we are pushed to fulfill them. At the same time, however, this knowledge has not helped much, not that it was completely useless, but it was less effective on a practical level than I had hoped.

JO: I would agree with that. On the other hand, perhaps the expectations are a little too high. It is of course understandable since we have been talking about the feminist movement, the liberation of women, etc., for 150 or 200 years, and that things have not progressed as much as we had hoped. There has been progress, no question about it, but the foundations, the fundamental injustices, are still very stable. Perhaps this is the source of our impatience. But the point is that we are fighting against centuries-old forms of subjectification and centuries-old power technologies. This cannot be solved in the blink of an eye by one generation, and certainly not as a side issue. I always find it grotesque that we assume that we can solve one of the most fundamental political problems on the side in care work.

EMA: Yes, maybe. In any case, when I didn't have a child yet, I thought that theory could do more. I hadn't yet seen how many singular acts are needed every day to resist the normalised roles. Faderman also describes something similar (Faderman 1981, pp. 213–214): in lesbian relationships, as fruitful as they most often have been for women writers, it has sometimes happened that, as soon as one of them devotes herself to writing, the other is pushed into patriarchal dependencies and care work, even if both had academic ambitions.

JO: That's very perfidious. The pattern is always that social pressure is privatised, which means that it is not translated into a political momentum, but is vented at home, in private or in therapy. For example, we argue about how we divide up our time. This makes it a problem that affects couples or families in their private lives, as if we could somehow just regulate the basic structures that lead to the problems. And yet the most important things are not in our power, by and large. The ridiculous wages, the housing shortage, the ecological disasters, the concrete institutional, social and administrative incentives to perpetuate the patriarchal organisation, etc. A certain part, certainly, is within our power. But not everything, which is why the privatisation of problems is a very efficient way to make criticism ineffective.

EMA: Okay, I'll leave it at that. I recently saw a book in the library with the title: 'If you just hadn't had children' (Steger 2014). That's typical, it's always about the argument, well, why are you whining that you can't write, if you hadn't had children, then... As if the incompatibility were somehow natural. We also saw quite quickly after the birth of our child what we also found in Marx and Federici: children are not a private matter, but they are socially essential. In addition, everyone else is involved because they are dependent on children in one way or another. It is not a private pleasure and we do not raise these children alone. In a strange way, it is the basis of everything and at the same time not thought of.

JO: The academic world in particular is inherently hostile to life. Or inherently hostile to children and therefore to parents. A final word?

EMA: No, no, that won't be my final word...

JO: I would like to say hello to my mom.

EMA: You haven't called her back in a month.

JO: I'm sorry, I didn't find the time.

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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*

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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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Collapsing borders: How online education shapes student-mothers' experiences in higher education

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The Covid-19 pandemic led many higher education institutions to pivot to online education. In part, institutions made these shifts to avoid losing revenue from declining student enrolment, a concern in many countries given a shift toward neoliberalism, in which the market dominates and concern for the public good fades (Harvey 2007; Saunders 2010). The change in course delivery brought both challenges and opportunities to all students, but the consequences of the transition were especially heightened for student-mothers. In this article, we explore how 57 student-mothers in the United States navigated online education during and after the pandemic. Participants in this national, longitudinal study discussed the challenges they faced engaging in coursework while caring for their children who were at home with them. However, many acknowledged that increased online offerings allowed them greater access to pursue education since they did not have to secure childcare. Using Clark's (2000) work-family border theory as a guide, the data demonstrate how online education enabled student-mothers to address their responsibilities associated with each role by integrating rather than segmenting these competing domains. Such action is contrary to the neoliberal state, which suggests that caregiving is a private act and incompatible with participation in the public sphere (Maker 2022). Although institutional actions were not taken to be care-full (Lynch 2009), ultimately online education facilitated increased access for student-mothers.

Keywords: *student-mothers; online education; neoliberalism; work-family border theory; Covid-19 pandemic*

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Introduction

> *Molly is a single mother to two boys, aged ten and eight years old. When she decided to pursue an associate's degree[1] in early childhood education, she had been working at a daycare for eight years and understood that a degree would afford her the ability to provide for her children through increased employment opportunities. Molly has virtually no support from her family and directly attributes her ability to pursue higher education to the option to pursue her academic program entirely online. She shared: 'I don't have anyone to watch my kids or to help move my kids, so when I am not working, I can't go to school 'cause I can't leave my kids home alone, so [with online courses] it definitely works out.' However, because of this limited family support, a full-time job, and her single parent status, Molly often finds herself completing schoolwork while watching her sons' basketball games, after their bedtime, or while waiting for dinner to cool. Molly shared that the option to enrol in a fully online program is what enables her to pursue higher education, stating: 'I love online work...It makes it able for me to do it, otherwise I wouldn't be able to go to school.'*

Molly's experience is representative of many of the student-mothers in this study who enrolled in online programs as a strategy for balancing their caregiving responsibilities and pursuit of higher education. The Covid-19 pandemic, while catastrophic in many ways, led to a wider institutional adoption of remote coursework that expanded access for individuals who previously could not enrol in higher education due to competing demands on their time and resources. Many institutions shifted from in-person to remote instruction with their students' safety as a main priority, yet others did so to avoid potential loss of revenue from students withdrawing from the institution (Turk, Soler & Vigil 2020). Lynch (2010) would characterise the latter as emanating from the culture of carelessness that characterises contemporary higher education, resulting largely from public sector reforms. This concern, coupled with decreasing student enrolment, reflects a larger societal shift toward neoliberalism, where the market becomes the priority and concern for serving the public declines (Harvey 2007; Saunders 2010). As neoliberalism also views parenting as an act that should occur privately within the home, it deems engagement in public spaces (i.e. education and employment) incompatible with caregiving (Maker 2022), implying that student-mothers cannot attend to both roles successfully. Although outside the bounds of this article, as we have argued elsewhere (see Sallee & Stefanese Yates 2023), student-mothers experience some challenges that are unique from those experiences of parents of all genders, though we know that student-parents of all genders are impacted by balancing caregiving and academics (Estes 2011). For consistency's sake, we use the language of student-mothers in this article to reflect that mothers constituted our participant pool.

Although previous literature does not always disaggregate the experience of student-mothers and fathers, the impact of gender on parenting creates disparate lived experiences (Cruse, Holtzman, Gault, Croom & Polk 2019; Gault, Milli & Cruse 2018). Student-fathers are one and a half times more likely to be married than women (Cruse et al. 2019), who are more likely than men to be

[1] The US higher education system has two types of institutions – two-year colleges that award short-course certificates or associates degrees, and four-year universities that award bachelor's degrees (American Council on Education, 2019).

single heads of household (Glynn 2019). Although student-parents represent nearly one quarter of all enrolled undergraduates in the US, mothers comprise 70% of that population (Cruse et al. 2019). Given that women comprise the majority of student-parents, are likely to be single heads of household, and are more likely than peers without children to have incomes that fall well below the poverty line, student-mothers face a myriad of additional challenges that student-fathers may not as they care for their families while pursuing higher education (Gault et al. 2014; Huelsman & Engle 2013; Institute for Women's Policy Research 2014). Additionally, higher education has been and continues to be a space dominated by patriarchal norms. As a result, care often goes unnoticed in higher education, with most institutions assuming students hold no caring responsibilities (Hook, Moreau & Brooks, 2022; Moreau 2016).

Higher education institutions vary in their response to student-mothers, ranging from very little or no support to 'mainstream' support which puts the needs of student-mothers on par with those of 'mainstream', or non-parenting, students (Moreau 2016; Sallee, Lewis & Collier 2023). At institutions that ignore caregivers, student-mothers can be seen as demanding special attention (Moreau 2016) but even institutions that implement more comprehensive support systems do not do so equitably, leaving student-mothers as outsiders in universities (Sallee et al. 2023). The ways in which some institutions address student-parents' distinct challenges vary but can include: financial support and preference for placement in on-campus childcare centers (Gault et al. 2018; Long 2017; Institute for Women's Policy Research 2014); targeted academic skill development (Dickson & Tennant 2018; Yakaboski 2010); and intentional academic advisement (Bone 2010; Cerven 2013). However, these services do not facilitate access for student-parents and can only support students once they have enrolled in an institution. Yet, even student-mothers who attend institutions that fund support programs still experience bureaucratic challenges since care does not contribute to the business of higher education (Hook, Moreau & Brooks 2022; Sallee et al. 2023; Sallee, Hine & Kohler 2024).

Due to the additional responsibilities that student-parents have, they are more likely than students without children to indicate a preference for academic programs that could be completed entirely online, which suggests that online instruction can facilitate access to higher education for this population (Gardner et al. 2021). Although many institutions shifted to remote instruction to preserve revenue (a characteristic of neoliberalism) (Felson & Adamczyk 2021) and not to be care-full, findings from this study indicate that remote instruction facilitated access for many student-mothers who, like Molly, otherwise would have been unable to pursue higher education. However, most institutions have since reverted to pre-pandemic modes of operation. This shift away from online education and return to in-person instruction has removed the ability for many student-mothers to integrate their parenting and school responsibilities, a strategy that was effective for many participants.

In short, this lack of access to online education may negatively impact this population's ability to persist to graduation. As student-parents represent 25% of all students enrolled in higher education in the US (Cruse et al. 2019), institutions should consider how they can create care-full (Lynch 2009) environments for student-parents, and particularly for student-mothers who experience additional challenges that fathers do not, in the post-pandemic era. Crafting intentionally supportive environments has the potential to support the persistence and academic success of student-mothers (Brown & Nichols 2013; Cox 2019; Yakaboski 2010) who, due to their

simultaneously-held roles as caregivers and college students, experience lower graduation rates (Wladis, Hachey & Conway 2018). Campuses that focus on building care-full climates for student-mothers can help address the multitude of challenges that come with pursuing higher education. For student-mothers, the unique issues they experience, like financial hardship, difficulty balancing competing priorities, and alienation within the classroom, often compound, negatively impacting academic success, persistence, and retention (Cerven et al. 2013; Dickson & Tennant 2018; Duquaine-Watson 2007; Wladis, Hachey & Conway 2018).

We begin this article with a discussion of Clark's (2000) work-family border theory, which we use as a lens to examine how and when student-mothers segment or integrate their parenting and school responsibilities. After describing the methods used, we share our findings, which demonstrate how online coursework facilitated access for many participants, while also discussing the challenges that remote education created for some student-mothers. We conclude with an examination of how work-family border theory operates in this particular context, with some participants finding success due to integrating roles and others highly segmenting responsibilities and boundaries.

Theoretical framework

Work-family border theory demonstrates how individuals create boundaries between distinct areas of their lives and can serve as a lens for exploring potential connections between different domains and the impact that other individuals may have on how borders operate between these various domains (Clark 2000). Implicit in the idea of work-family border theory is the notion that the areas of work and family are two separate yet interconnected domains, each with borders that need to be effectively managed in order to achieve balance, which Clark (2000) equated with satisfaction and minimal role conflict. In this article, we adapt work-family border theory by replacing the domain of work with school to explore how students navigate these different domains. This frame was offered by Clark (2000) as a mechanism for examining the ways in which individuals separate the two spheres, as segmenting work and family became especially prevalent after the Industrial Revolution, and employment outside of the home became more widespread. Historically, employment and family-related activities occurred in different spaces and times, each possessing their own expectations, practices, cultures, and border-keepers (i.e. individuals like spouses or children; or in work settings, coworkers or supervisors, who influence how individuals manage and engage in each domain) (Coontz 2016; Morf 1989); however, with the increase in virtual work and school options, combined with changing family structures, work-family border theory offers a lens to explore how individuals might segment or integrate their varying responsibilities, including continued education. Individuals may create temporal (time), psychological (emotional), and spatial (location) boundaries or borders between their various roles (e.g. parent, student, employee, partner), often in an attempt to segment and, thus, focus on different responsibilities at varying points in time (Clark 2000). Yet, as many of the student-mothers in this study suggest, dissolving boundaries and integrating multiple roles might serve as an effective strategy to accomplish the responsibilities associated with caregiving and the pursuit of higher education.

In applying Clark's (2000) framework to student-mothers' approaches to managing coursework with parenting responsibilities, temporal borders can be illustrated by the times in which student-mothers prepare for class or complete homework versus reserving a specific time of day to devote to childcare (e.g. dinner or bedtime). However, during the pandemic and the turn toward online

education, student-mothers often engaged in remote coursework alongside their children, integrating both their student and mother roles. For example, student-mothers may have enacted spatial boundaries while engaged in remote coursework by reserving a particular area within their home to conduct schoolwork or requesting that children not enter such a space while parents are logged into a virtual class. Psychological borders, or actions that are intentionally enacted to ensure that particular practices or emotions are reserved for specific domains, could be illustrated by an individual mentally disengaging from domestic duties while listening to a lecture from their kitchen table.

A critical component of work-family border theory is the act of either segmenting or integrating roles, which Clark (2000) suggested occurs on a continuum. The degree to which segmentation or integration may occur is dependent on several factors, including the permeability and flexibility of boundaries as well as the actions of border-keepers. Permeability refers to the extent that a border permits any factor associated with one domain to influence another; and flexibility, similarly, references how adaptable a boundary is to the demands of another domain (Clark 2000). For example, a home office with spatial boundaries, like a door, can be viewed as highly permeable if children enter the space often and without announcing themselves; however, if an individual creates rules around specific times that interruptions are not allowed, this border becomes less flexible than if there were no limits on when family members can enter the space. Clark (2000) indicated that similar domains (for example, completing administrative work for employment and a presentation for class) can often result in weak borders that ultimately facilitate balance between work and family, while strong borders are critical when domains vary significantly (e.g. preparing dinner for a family and developing a presentation for class). However, border-keepers, or individuals who can shape the timing of and ways in which participants engage in and manage both the work and family domains, can influence the permeability of boundaries enacted by student-mothers. In this study, children or professors are examples of border-keepers who can impact the ways in which student-mothers manage their roles.

Although previous studies have highlighted the utility of work-family border theory in examining individuals and contexts with multiple roles and responsibilities (for an example, see Sallee & Lewis 2020), they differ from this study in that they either focus on the benefits of segmenting work and family responsibilities or the context varies from that of the present study. For example, Adisa and colleagues (2022) found that individuals in the academy working from home during the Covid-19 lockdowns experienced decreased flexibility due to an inability to segment work and family responsibilities. Although findings from the current study vary from previous research that utilises work-family border theory, these particular results underscore the value of integrating roles in the context of student-mothers.

Methodology

Using Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study approach (CCS), we compared longitudinal data across horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes to study the experiences of student-mothers attending two- and four-year institutions. The vertical axis is concerned with how participants' experiences are shaped by policy, while the transversal axis is focused on data collection over time (Bartlett & Vavrus 2017). In this article, we focus on the horizontal axis, which interrogates how a phenomenon occurs in various locations (i.e. a multi-site comparison) (Bartlett & Vavrus 2017). We examined the impact of remote education on student-mothers'

abilities to manage each of their roles across the US (horizontal) with data collection occurring over a one-year period (transversal). As experiences can and often do vary based on individual contexts, we specifically explore how the experiences of student-mothers across 20 US states, a wide geographical range and number of sites, compared and contrasted as they navigated in-person and online courses post-pandemic.

Participant recruitment and selection

Participants were low-income, undergraduate student-mothers in the US who were eligible for the Pell grant[2], a federal government-funded program to assist low-income students with higher education costs. Recruitment occurred through emails to national listservs and offices that serve student-parents on campus. As a result, 57 student-mothers were recruited for the first round of interviews. Of the 57 participants, 28 are white,[3]11 are Hispanic or Latina, 11 are Black, African, or African American, three are multi-racial, three are Asian or Pacific Islander, and one declined to state. 29 student-mothers were enrolled in four-year institutions (bachelor degree-granting institutions), 28 were enrolled at community colleges, which typically grant vocational certificates or prepare students for transfer to bachelor's degree institutions, and four were transferring from a community college to a bachelor's degree-granting institution during the first interview. One participant identified as gender-queer, but all participants identified as mothers. Starting in spring 2022, 57 student-mothers participated in the first round of interviews; 42 of the 57 original participants returned for the second round in late 2022, and 35 returned for the third round in spring 2023. Ethics approval was secured through the authors' Institutional Review Board. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

Methods

Three semi-structured interviews, conducted over the course of a year, serve as the primary sources of data. The first round of interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and centered on the participants' educational history, the influences that motivated them to pursue a degree, and the types of support they received from their institutions and other aid sources. The second interviews focused on the participants' academic and parenting experiences over the prior six months as well as their feelings concerning the overturning of Roe v Wade, US legislation which guaranteed women the right to abortion. The last set of interviews focused on updates regarding the participants' lives as mothers and students as well as the impact of state politics on their experiences. While the interviews, as part of a larger research endeavour, were not intended to centre on the student-mother's experience with online and in-person courses as they pertain to boundaries between home and school work, many student-mothers naturally expressed feelings regarding those boundaries. Before the first and third interviews, participants were asked to complete a short survey about the types and amounts of aid they received from their institutions and social services. As an incentive to participate, participants were given a gift card for each completed interview: $25 for the first and second interviews and $50 for the third interview.

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[2] Pell grants are awarded to students with the most exceptional need, which is qualified as having an expected family contribution less than the total maximum Pell Grant amount. For the 2024-2025 award year, the maximum Pell award is $7,395 (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities 2024)

[3] We intentionally choose not to capitalise 'white' in reference to race to create rhetorical distance from white supremacy.

Data analysis and trustworthiness
For the purpose of this article, we focused on data that reflected how student-mothers experienced online or in-person classes and their interaction with their responsibilities as a parenting student. Using Atlas.ti, we explored how mode of course delivery affected boundaries between the student-mother's academic and family lives. This was done by examining codes regarding conflict, decision making, academic difficulty, and modes of delivery. In our analysis we found that 47 student-mothers mentioned a preference for online courses, or that online courses allowed them to better manage their parental and student roles. Thirty student-mothers expressed a preference for in-person courses, or noted that in-person courses resulted in firmer boundaries between their academic and parental roles. It is worth noting that some student-mothers held mixed feelings regarding both in-person and online courses, which is why the total of the two groups above exceeds the sample size.

To establish trustworthiness, we engaged in both method and investigator triangulation (Lincoln & Guba 1985). We collected data using both interviews and surveys and had multiple investigators engaged in data collection and analysis. We jointly generated a codebook and coded initial transcripts together to ensure agreement on application of codes.

Positionality
Margaret is a white professor and a solo mother to young twins. She has spent the past two decades studying work-family issues for faculty, staff, and students at universities and brought both her professional and personal experiences to the project. Her parenting identity allowed her to develop empathy with all participants; she felt a particular sense of connection with single-mother participants as well as those parenting young children. Like many of the participants, Margaret also transitioned to online courses during the first two years of the pandemic, which allowed her to manage her own work-family conflict. She has since valued a return to in-person teaching, but has tried to keep her experiences from shaping her analysis of these data.

Danielle is a white-passing Puerto Rican woman who at the time of data collection was a doctoral student. She is married and the mother of an eight-year old child. Her shared identity as a student-mother may have facilitated rapport with participants, especially those whose school-aged children were engaged in remote school during the pandemic. The blurring of boundaries between school and home in her own life enabled her to uniquely empathise with and relate to participants. However, the differences in age, marital status, and class between Danielle and many of the participants may have impacted the level of detail shared in interviews.

Sara is a white doctoral student and although she does not have children, Sara spent a decade caring for an aging parent while working and attending school. Sara joined the project midway and did not interview participants, but was actively involved in data analysis. Like many participants, she also found herself enrolled in online courses during the pandemic and felt conflicted over the balance between work and family, factors which she tried to keep out of her data analysis. Her caregiver identity and the shared online schooling phenomenon allowed her to empathise with participants despite not sharing a parenting identity.

While we each shared some identities with participants, as parents or students, we did not share all identities. Positioning ourselves as insider-outsiders (Mercer 2007) allowed us to share those

similarities to better facilitate discussion through mutual understanding without impeding upon the significance of the topics discussed. Our outsider status also allowed us to stay curious and ask questions to interrogate various aspects of participants' experiences.

Findings

Although students in the US were forced to transition to online courses because of the Covid-19 pandemic, many student-mothers discussed the ways that such courses were beneficial for their lives as mothers, students, and, in some cases, employees. Although some students discussed challenges with online courses and missing the interaction and support that comes with in-person courses, the majority of participants praised online courses for facilitating their access to and persistence in tertiary education. In what follows, we discuss the benefits that online courses brought for student-mothers while also acknowledging some of its challenges.

Online Courses Facilitate Access to Tertiary Education

Of the 57 student-mothers we interviewed, 47 reported that they took online courses at some point in their degree program. Many in this group appreciated the delivery of online courses, such as Audrey who said, 'I just wish all of the classes could be online….The more online, the better', and Alexis who said, 'I've been able to take everything online…It's very helpful because my life is chaotic cos I can work everything into my schedule when I have time for it'. Similarly, Raya described her online courses as 'very, very convenient'. Many of the participants did not intentionally select online courses, but found themselves suddenly taking online courses in March 2020 due to the shifts necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. But many mothers commented on how beneficial such a move was. For example, Aria described how moving to online courses allowed her to stay enrolled during and after her pregnancy. 'When the pandemic hit, it actually was sort of convenient for me…cos the lectures…switched to online. So I was able to even, up until [being] eight months [pregnant], I was able to keep being in school'.

Aria was not the only one to have such an experience. Candace gave birth during the middle of the semester and logged on the next day to introduce her son to her professor and classmates. Candace's experience underscores the importance of both supportive border-keepers and high flexibility of borders. In welcoming Candace to visit with the class post-delivery, the professor signaled that Candace was an important member of the community, and the visit was only possible because the instructor enabled flexible borders between the participant's student and parent roles. Candace lamented that many institutions were no longer offering such courses: 'I wish that they continued at least some things online, but it's so minimal now. There's nothing. And you didn't have to worry about childcare expenses or anything either….I almost wish it would just go back online'. Aria noted the benefits of saving money on childcare while she pursued her education, though for many women, lack of access to childcare was both a benefit and a drawback. As institutions started to shift away from online education, this closed avenues for some women to participate in higher education. As Emily concluded, 'I hate to make it sound like Covid has been like a great thing, but I don't know that I would've gotten through college had the timing been what it was with everything being virtual'.

Student-mothers took a variety of online courses to facilitate their success, ranging from completely asynchronous courses to synchronous courses and, in some cases, hybrid courses. Some discussed appreciating asynchronous courses, which allowed them to complete work

whenever they had the time, such as Melissa who reported that she completed all of her assignments for the semester for some classes as soon as she could. Karen described how helpful it was to be able to complete her asynchronous courses ‘at [her] own pace’ because it was ‘really, really helpful for [her] work schedule’. Karen was not the only one to comment on how online courses were critical for her persistence in higher education. When we asked Luna if she would ever take an in-person class, she replied, ‘Probably not. While I’m working, it’s just not realistic’. Like Karen, she also appreciated taking asynchronous courses because completing the requirements was just ‘easier’, in part due to the flexibility to integrate domains.

Other participants discussed how they completed their courses around their work and parenting responsibilities. For example, Audrey shared how she fit her first year of coursework around full-time work, usually doing her schoolwork and courses after her kids went to sleep:

> I really liked it because I was working full time and because I'm a mom, I feel like every single time I have the opportunity to take a class online, I will. It’s just easier. I have a lot more freedom and I can [study from] 9 pm to 2 am if I need to and still have time to be with my kids and work a job.

For Audrey and others, online courses allowed them to more easily integrate their academic and mothering responsibilities, due to permeable boundaries.

Many participants discussed how online education allowed them to be more present for their children. Several discussed taking online courses with infants and other young children, including several mothers who credited online courses with allowing them to continue breastfeeding with minimal challenges, suggesting that highly permeable and flexible boundaries benefitted participants. For example, Candace described how she navigated coursework and caring for her young son. ‘If I had to nurse him, I would usually message the professor in the chat and be like, “Hey, sorry, my camera's off. I'm nursing my son”. And they'd be like, “Okay, it's fine”’. The professor’s response signaled that student-mothers belonged in the classroom and is indicative of the criticality of supportive border-keepers. As we described earlier, she lamented the end of online education multiple times throughout the interview, telling us:

> It was honestly a really great experience. And I wish you could go back to some sort of online, I think in that way it benefitted me a ton because I got to stay home with my baby. I got to establish breastfeeding with him without having to worry about school or credits besides just getting it done.

She was not the only mother who described how she appreciated online courses for facilitating her ability to parent, though simultaneously noted the challenges of doing so. Devika described the challenges of attending her all-synchronous courses while parenting her toddler:

> I usually am off camera. I'm with my daughter and I'm not able to be on camera, but other times I just have my phone and her on the side and I'm just paying attention to class, trying to take notes on the side, and checking in on her every now and then to make sure that she's okay.

Veronica had two children, aged eight and ten, who needed less direct supervision, which allowed her to focus more on her classes, though she wrestled with tremendous guilt as she felt that she

was 'spending a lot of time on [herself], not engaging with [her] kids'. She shared that she would occasionally leave her study area to check on her children when all of them were home during the pandemic, illustrating the permeability of boundaries in her home. Daniela, like many mothers, described how during the pandemic she took online courses alongside her son: 'All we did was spend time all day together. He was in online school. I was in online school. It went really well'. Although there were many challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic for students and families, many of these participants found ways to make integrating their two roles work.

Many mothers discussed the ways that they fit school around their parenting responsibilities. For example, Gianna discussed how she completed 'a lot of [her] classes in the car, watching [her] kids'. She went on to say that 'it could be really stressful, like really stressful, but I think it's worth it. Cause if I just like power through the really hard parts, it'll be a lot easier when I'm done'. Another mother shared that she only came back to higher education because she saw they had online courses and, as a single mother, would not have been able to enrol in higher education otherwise. Molly, whose vignette opened the article, also indicated the necessity of a fully online program to facilitate her success - and also the flexibility it provides to continue to meet her family's needs:

> We went to the beach last week and I was able to work ahead and finish my schoolwork so I didn't have anything due while I was at the beach. So I could take that time and spend with the kids, solely with them and not worry about schoolwork.

Although some professors might balk at the thought of a student going on vacation during the semester, Molly reminds us that many students have multiple responsibilities that come before their student identity and permeable borders can enable the successful accomplishment of tasks associated with various roles. Not only were online courses critical for her enrolment due to a lack of other support in her life, but fully asynchronous courses allowed her to achieve family fun while also attending to her academic responsibilities.

Challenges with online education

Despite the praise that many participants gave to online courses, many still noted the benefits that in-person classes brought. While some cited specific reasons for their desire to return to or be in a face-to-face environment, some simply preferred the in-person experience such as Carmen who chose a campus near her home so the commute would not interfere with her ability to take in-person classes, and Sophia who stated, '[I] really love being in a classroom'. Others wished for an in-person experience like Harper who, in her final year after having all her prior coursework online or in hybrid format, stated, 'Please be in person. I don't want to have hybrid classes my whole time'. Of the student-mothers who discussed a preference for in-person courses, many discussed the difficulties they faced in their social and academic lives after being pushed into online classes during the pandemic. For them, the move to online education was challenging because the blurred boundaries between family time and school work posed difficulties for both spheres.

In-person classes can give students the opportunity to make connections and collaborate with their classmates, which can be difficult to replicate in an online format. Amanda, for example, did not find connection with her classmates in the online setting stating:

> There wasn't a lot of like-minded and similar people that you have online discussions with… You didn't connect with them outside of the discussions in the class. I would have to be like actually there in person to get more social connection with people.

Valentina also missed the in-person connection with classmates, but found that she also struggled to get to know her instructors and felt a general disconnect with her campus as a whole:

> When the pandemic hit, that was really hard to get to know people and connect with staff and even just instructors, it wasn't the same. So that was really hard. And I feel like now that classes are online, I'm barely starting to get to know people and really connect with the campus.

The social experience of attending courses in person can be a large part of the higher education experience, which was an important factor to Jackie who regretted missing out on these connections by taking online courses, saying, ‘I felt like I would have been able to have a better college experience… I would have been a normal college kid as opposed to a mom struggling to go to college’. For some students who had the opportunity to take in-person classes prior to the pandemic, connecting with others was one of the more noteworthy parts of their classroom experience. For example, Violet said that ‘having everything done in person was better. I think I understood more having to interact directly with my instructor. It was great to work with friends [and] classmates’.

In-person classes also gave some student-mothers the opportunity to focus on their coursework in a way that may not have been possible in an online format, either because it did not fit into their schedule or because the boundaries between their home and academic responsibilities were undefined. As Anna shared, ‘the time balance between schooling and parenting is really hard in online classes’. Alexis also struggled with accomplishing both online coursework and spending time with her son. She recalled one interaction with him:

> I was in the middle of a statistics quiz. I had to finish it, I couldn't just leave it there. And I'm finishing it but I can't, "Mom look at this! Look at this! Look at this!" I feel like I brush him off a lot.

Similarly, Charlotte reminisced about leaving the house to take classes, mentioning the difficulty she experienced trying to focus and the struggle with managing her classes while also caring for her daughter. Just finding a quiet place to do classwork proved difficult for some student-mothers, like Madeline who said, ‘quiet places to focus on homework, it's impossible within the house’.

Although a majority of student-mothers discussed the balance that online courses brought to their lives in terms of scheduling and caregiving, some participants found online classes created ambiguous flexibility and in-person classes allowed for more concrete barriers between the academic and parenting domains. Sophia found that online classes did not allow her to schedule boundaries into her day the way in-person courses did. Evelyn also battled with the challenges of online versus in-person scheduling saying, ‘the pandemic was great for school because I could get all my homework done…but also it wasn't great because it was unstructured time and I had to

figure it out myself'. For some student-mothers, being on campus allowed them to get more work done, structuring their time efficiently so they had fewer school-related tasks once they got home, ultimately segmenting the academic and family domains. For example, Madeline used some of her time on campus for self-care, stating, '[I] did a swim class too because, if I give myself that time, that's like my me time'. While not for self-care, Gemma used her time on campus to do her school work which allowed her to focus on parenting while at home:

> I typically go right to campus and I utilise as much free time as I can on campus with my readings, or just catching up on assignments…I try to get that done because by the time my girls get home I don't have time to do the things that I need to do for me.

For Gemma and others, in-person classes separate the school day from their home life. Being on campus allowed for the space to accomplish school tasks without having to also juggle family responsibilities, an effective demonstration of segmentation. Their experiences stand in contrast to those of participants who valued being able to integrate their competing responsibilities.

Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic forced many higher education institutions to shift courses online, with higher education institutions motivated by both safety, and a desire to be care-full, and financial concerns, as an embrace of neoliberalism continues (Felson & Adamczyk 2021; Lynch 2009; Turk, Soler & Vigil 2020). The transition to remote education created both challenges and opportunities for all students as well as student-mothers in particular (Evans 2024). As we discussed, many student-mothers credit the shift to online education for allowing them to maintain enrolment in higher education as they could combine their two roles. In contrast, others expressed a preference for in-person courses, noting that sometimes being able to segment their competing responsibilities allowed them to more easily focus on each. We return to Clark's (2000) work-family border theory to help us make sense of these findings and consider how the emergent turn toward online education (Adedoyin & Soykan 2020; Gillis & Krull 2020) actually helped many student-mothers persist in higher education.

Work-family border theory suggests that individuals have competing roles that come into conflict; these roles often emanate from responsibilities in competing domains, such as work and school (Clark 2000). These domains are separated by borders that can be temporal, spatial, or psychological. Temporal boundaries suggest that responsibilities for each domain happen at different times. Many participants discussed completing their courses or homework when their children were not present or sleeping, signaling the influence of border-keepers on decisions related to segmentation. However, some were able to collapse temporal boundaries by bringing their children with them to online courses or doing homework alongside their children, ultimately integrating the work and family domains. Spatial boundaries refer to where responsibilities occur. Some participants valued separating their parenting and academic responsibilities by taking in-person courses; this allowed for a strict spatial segmentation. However, even students who took online courses frequently discussed going into a different room or space to do their coursework, thus creating borders that were sometimes flexible and permeable. Some exceptions existed, such as Devika who attended synchronous courses while her toddler played nearby. Psychological

boundaries refer to the cognitive boundaries individuals construct about their ability to integrate two roles. For some participants, being a parent and student simultaneously was not compatible while others were able to bring the two responsibilities together. Ultimately, border-keepers and the flexibility and permeability of boundaries greatly affected the decisions that student-mothers made around when, where, and how they attended to their varied responsibilities.

In some instances, constructing strict boundaries between the roles allows individuals to thrive while in others collapsing the boundaries facilitates success. Clark (2000) posited that when domains are similar, weak borders will facilitate work-family balance while strong borders are necessary when domains are different. Given that parenting and schooling require very different demands from individuals, some student-mothers' preferences for segmentation, or separation between the roles, makes sense. Recall Violet and Gemma who both suggested that it was much easier for them to focus when they were able to attend to their school responsibilities while on campus, likely as they were able to control and reduce the permeability of the boundaries constructed between responsibilities for their families and coursework, as well as the influence of certain border-keepers (i.e. children). Others shared that they found being able to engage in conversation with classmates and professors much easier when they were in an in-person setting without the demands of their children standing in the way.

In contrast, many student-mothers found that taking online courses, and thereby collapsing borders between work and home, allowed them to thrive. Some, including Audrey, shared that they likely would not have been able to continue their education without access to online courses because of their other responsibilities. This was particularly true at the height of the pandemic when some student-mothers were also facilitating online education for their own children, such as Daniela who shared how she completed her own courses at the same time as her child did online schooling. Some student-mothers shared that asynchronous online courses were more helpful for facilitating their persistence in higher education, which makes sense in light of work-family border theory. Although they were completing their coursework at home, they usually did so after their children were asleep, so they could schedule it around their parenting responsibilities, a reminder that border-keepers can greatly impact the permeability of boundaries.

Work-family border theory and studies that have utilised this frame (Sallee & Lewis 2020) suggest that strong borders between different domains lead to more success. Some student-mothers were able to successfully attend to accomplishing tasks from the two domains at the same time (e.g. helping their children with a craft while completing a homework assignment). However, for most, the move to online education did not facilitate success because student-mothers could accomplish two roles at the same time. Rather, it allowed student-mothers to determine when and where they did their work that most benefitted themselves and their families - and not on a schedule pre-established by their institutions. As discussed earlier in the article, the transition to online education was made not only for health reasons, but for financial reasons as well, due to many countries' shifts towards neoliberalism. Regardless of the rationale for transitioning to remote coursework, it ultimately proved to be a care-full (Felson & Adamczyk 2021; Lynch 2009) undertaking, allowing student-mothers to better integrate their parenting and student roles. The irony, of course, is that most institutions are not designed to be care-full (Lynch 2010), but rather this accommodation occurred in spite of, not because of, the policy. These findings lead to several implications for practice.

Implications

Student-mothers thrive when they can determine when and where they do their work. Many participants expressed a deep loss at the turn away from online courses; as such, we encourage institutions to continue to offer online courses to cater to students with multiple responsibilities. Such courses could take multiple formats, including asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid options. We would also strongly advise institutions to consider offering courses - both seated and online - at multiple times throughout the day. Some student-mothers could only do their schoolwork in the evenings because of their parenting responsibilities. Institutions might consider offering synchronous and seated courses in the evenings to create opportunities for students to interact with their peers and professors without the demands of parenthood interfering.

As many student-mothers indicated that a lack of childcare precipitated the need for options to enrol in online education, providing resources for parents to secure daycare or afterschool care for their children may address a critical concern for this population. Institutions could help student-parents navigate this issue by providing financial support for childcare and reserving spaces in on-campus daycare centers for enrolled parents.

Given the difficulty that some student-mothers experienced in building social connections, one strategy that institutions could employ to support this population is facilitating opportunities to create community. This intentional cultivation could occur in partnership with family and parent resource centres and include critical support services that are not always easily accessible to students who are primarily enrolled in online coursework. For institutions that may not have dedicated services for families and parents, a listserv that regularly disseminates information could be a valuable and low-cost investment in this particular population. Student-mothers at institutions across the globe could benefit from more intentional consideration of their unique needs as parents pursuing higher education. Ultimately, we would encourage institutions to shift their practices from being care-less to care-full, thus creating space for student-parents of all genders to thrive.

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Living the best way possible: Distance doctoral students navigating care for others and themselves

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Caring responsibilities can shape how students negotiate access, experience and success in doctoral education. However, norms that construct the ideal university subject as 'carefree' continue to circulate, framing the experiences and expectations of doctoral students, their supervisors, and others who work with them. This paper shares care-related insights from an international survey involving 521 doctoral students across 42 countries who undertook their studies wholly or partly off-campus. Over half of these respondents had caring responsibilities for others, underlining the importance of distance modes for student carers. Many carer respondents felt distance modes offered the best way possible to organise life, education, and caring responsibilities. Care for self was also an important thread throughout the data, encompassing students managing specific physical or mental health needs as well as being proactive in caring for themselves through the challenges of doctoral education. Finally, in terms of care that respondents received rather than provided, peer connections with other doctoral students were emphasised as critical sites of care that enabled wellbeing and success. Given that both off-campus students and student carers have often been rendered less visible in higher and doctoral education, this paper brings new insights into the important nexus between distance study and care – in multiple forms – for doctoral students.

Keywords: *care; caring responsibilities; student carers; distance education; doctoral education; higher education*

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Introduction

The category of 'carers' has emerged as a key dimension shaping doctoral students' access, experience, and success, and a growing body of scholarship has offered windows into the lived experiences of doctoral student carers (e.g. Burford & Hook 2019; Burford & Mitchell 2022; Markides 2020; Mason, Bond & Ledger 2023). However, norms that construct the ideal university inhabitant as 'carefree' (Moreau & Kerner 2015, p. 215) continue to circulate, shaping the experiences of doctoral students, their supervisors, and others who work with them. The challenges reported by doctoral carers are international in scope, with accounts emerging from Australia (Cronshaw, Stokes & McCulloch 2023), the UK (*It's hard being a carer and a PhD student. My university couldn't care less* 2016) and the US (Mirick & Wladkowski 2018) that are consistent with the wider invisibility of carers across higher education (Moreau & Wheeler 2023).

The in/visibility of carers in academic contexts is also unevenly distributed. Some groups of carers are more in/visible than others; for example, 'parenting able-bodied children is the most common form of caring acknowledged' (Moreau & Wheeler 2023, p. 10). As Moreau and Wheeler continue, research considering equity issues in relation to care 'overwhelmingly focuses on women' (p. 10) and typically 'assumes a heteronormative family setting' (p. 11). While there are examples to the contrary, the research on carers in higher education contexts often pays less attention to men who care, sole parents, and LGBTQ+ carers, and often does not consider factors such as ethnicity, migration, or carers who themselves have disabilities. Some groups of 'carees' (i.e. those who are being cared for) are also considered less frequently: in contrast to the emphasis on care for able-bodied children, care for animals, for those with emotional or mental health conditions, and for those at end of life is rarely made visible within the research literature.

This paper considers another sub-group of carers who have experienced relatively less visibility: distance doctoral students with care responsibilities. Deem (2022, writing about European contexts) highlights how compared to undergraduate or Masters students, doctoral students 'are rendered invisible in their universities' (p. 373), with distance or remote students being even less visible than their on-campus peers (see also Bates & Goff 2012). In this paper, we thus consider a group at the intersection of multiple sources of invisibility: students who are positioned as (relatively) invisible at institutions first by virtue of being doctoral students, then by being *remote* doctoral students, and then by also being engaged in caring. Another rationale shaping our argument emerges from previous findings about the gendered spatialities of doctoral education (Burford & Hook 2019), which has suggested that working off campus, and particularly at home, can be a vital way that students can 'live the best way possible' and manage to access doctoral education alongside their care responsibilities.

To inform our exploration, we next consider the concepts of *distance* and *care* in higher and doctoral education. We then report on our study and articulate its contribution to the literatures on care, doctoral education, distance education, and the intersections of these experiences.

Background

Conceptualising care in higher education and doctoral study

Across higher education research, various pathways into understanding 'care' are evident. Some scholars define care and carers to include 'those looking after children, parents, friends and other family and community members' (Hook, Moreau & Brooks 2022, p. 1). Importantly, Hook and colleagues (2022) recognise multiple kinds of labour within this definition, including

physical, emotional, and organisational. A range of additional considerations relating to the conceptualisation of 'carers' has emerged across the literature, including understanding how caring identities are raced, classed, and gendered, and the notion that care should be understood as relational rather than unipositional. For example, people can be understood as being involved in 'care chains', both caring for others and being cared for by others (Baker & Burke 2023, p. 2). Care is thus not only something that flows outward (giving care) but may also flow inward (receiving care, self-care); care does not only cost us (giving care) but may also benefit us (through receiving care and/or self-care, as well as through the satisfaction and meaning attached to giving care). Our conceptualisation of care in this paper acknowledges this complexity and the multidirectional, intersectional nature of care.

While efforts over many decades have sought to expand access to higher education for a range of non-traditional and minoritised students, students with caring responsibilities have tended not to be recognised through this widening participation lens (Hook, Moreau & Brooks 2022; Spacey, Sanderson & Zile 2024). This necessitates specific attention for those who manage heavy care responsibilities. The call for papers for this special issue drew upon Tronto's argument that 'we must honor what most people spend their lives doing: caring for themselves, for others, and for the world' (1994, p. x). It is along these lines that we have developed the working definition of 'care' for this paper. Extending from recent doctoral education scholarship which has sought to configure care as something that is 'foundational (rather than peripheral) to contemporary doctoral curricula' (Burford & Mitchell 2022, p. 123), in this paper we take a deliberately encompassing understanding of care. In particular, we have been inspired by Barnacle's (2018) notion of the 'Care-full PhD', which enables us to conceive of doctoral care encompassing care for the self and others, and also extending to care for thought and for the wider world we share.

Distance in higher and doctoral education

Although the beginnings of distance education have long been disputed, historical accounts of distance education commonly identify three generations of provision: (1) correspondence; (2) broadcast technology; and (3) computer mediation. Many scholars argue that a driving concern across these generations of distance education provision has been access, with distance modes positioned as essential for providing educational opportunities to women (Faith 1998), disabled people (Nasiri & Mafakheri 2015), and geographical communities under-served by other learning modes (Anderson & Simpson 2012). However, others (e.g. Sumner 2000) have questioned the tendency for 'heroic' narratives to be stuck onto distance education, pointing to the ways distance provision can be used to serve governments and corporate stakeholders (e.g. via cost cutting) over and above other communities of interest. Provision that is anchored in the needs and practices of on-campus students has often left off-campus students with a second-best experience of higher education; for example, off-campus students may have reduced access to support services, faculty members, peers, professional development, research culture, and a sense of belonging than their on-campus peers. We view this paper, and its linking of distance doctoral education with ideas of care, as aligning with equity-focused constructions of distance in higher education, and indeed we have called elsewhere for distance to be viewed through such a lens (e.g. McChesney et al. 2024).

While distance higher education offerings date back to the University of London's first provision of distance undergraduate degrees in the mid-19th century, distance *doctoral* education has a shorter history (McChesney & Burford in press). Today, it remains difficult to access comprehensive data on the number of doctoral students studying via distance, contributing to the relative invisibility of this cohort (Deem 2022). The lack of comprehensive

data is, in part, because institutional data on ‘distance’ students often only counts students who are enrolled in programmes that are formally classified as distance, remote, or online programmes, thus missing the many other students who are technically enrolled in ‘on-campus’ programmes but in reality choose to study without attending campus in person (Evans, Hickey & Davis 2004). In addition, some institutions have no formalised distance pathways, meaning there is no mechanism for students studying off-campus to be recognised and counted. This ‘subterranean “distance”’ within doctoral education has led us to call elsewhere for a critique of the distance/on-campus binary in doctoral education (Burford et al. 2024, p. 13).

Distance doctoral education has been a site of research since the turn of the 21st century. Early studies predominantly focused on pedagogical matters, including: distance doctoral supervision (e.g. Crossouard 2008; Nasiri & Mafakheri 2015); skills and competencies for distance doctoral students (e.g. Lindner, Dooley & Murphy 2001; Winston & Fields 2003); and distance delivery of professional doctorates such as a Doctor of Nursing or Doctor of Education (e.g. Evans & Green 2012). More recent work has continued to inquire into distance supervision, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Löfström et al. 2024; Wisker et al. 2021) and has also reflected increasing interest in students’ subjective experiences, identities, and stories (e.g. Carter, Smith & Harrison 2021; Lynch et al. 2020).

Through this latter body of work, we have gained glimpses into the presence and experiences of distance doctoral students who are carers. For example, Burford and Hook (2019) use collaborative autoethnography to explore how distance doctoral student carers manage space to allow both their care work and their doctoral work to take place at home. They acknowledge the contradictions inherent in these dual roles and the possibility that care work may interrupt the doctorate. However, Burford and Hook (2019) also affirm the possibility of combining distance doctoral and care work, and in response to their own accounts of unexpected and imperfect at-home workspaces, comment: ‘These may not be the kinds of environments that doctoral research is imagined to thrive in, but they can be fertile spaces for intellectual work and care nevertheless’ (p. 1353).

In contrast to Burford and Hook’s more hopeful conclusion, Abdellatif and Gatto’s (2020) shared autoethnography foregrounds some negative impacts of distance modes intersecting with their wider identities, including as carers. They present an in-depth reflective account of both a sample day and a wider season in their lives as doctoral students and parents during Covid-19 lockdowns (which forced many doctoral students into distance modes of study). One of them writes: “With the lockdown, I’m double locked. Neither receiving the childcare support, nor having the chance to take a break from the ‘tsunami’ of responsibilities bombarding me over a night. I am struggling to perform other identities…” (Abdellatif & Gatto 2020, p. 731).

These contrasting accounts underline the existence of multiple experiences of being at the intersection of distance doctoral study and care (and, indeed, located at other intersections too). Higher education institutions need to know more about the doctoral-carer intersection to inform support and provision for this cohort. As such, the present study seeks to complement the valuable body of autoethnographic accounts by providing a more ‘zoomed-out’ view of care across a larger group of distance doctoral students. Drawing on survey responses from 521 distance doctoral students, we seek to answer the following questions: (1) In what ways was care evident in the accounts of distance doctoral students? and (2) How did these forms of care intersect with the students’ distance doctoral experiences?

Methods

Data for this paper comes from an international survey conducted (using the Qualtrics survey platform) in 2022 that focused on the experiences of students undertaking doctoral research at a distance. Much research in doctoral education is situated in specific local and/or disciplinary contexts, and larger-scale studies are relatively scarce. This landscape, as well as the general lack of up-to-date information about distance doctoral education, contributed to our choice to pursue an international, cross-disciplinary survey design. While this choice gave us breadth, it naturally limited the depth of data we could gain from any one respondent or in relation to any one geographic or disciplinary context. We return to this consideration at the conclusion of the paper.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from all authors' institutional ethics committees. To be eligible to complete the survey, respondents were required to either be currently enrolled in a doctorate or have completed a doctorate with a graduation date within 2015-2022. As such, the experiences captured in the survey extend before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Respondents also needed to have undertaken some or all of their doctorate at a distance. We specified that this could take many forms, including: living close to their institution but working from home; being located far from their institution; studying online; travelling away from their institution to conduct fieldwork/data collection; hybrid or mixed modes of on- and off-campus study; being unable to work on-campus due to lockdowns, health/mobility issues, natural disasters or other circumstances; or other situations other than consistent on-campus study. Our goal in keeping the definition of 'distance' broad was to explore the variation contained within this term.

We promoted the survey using our personal, professional, institutional, and social networks, and received 521 responses from doctoral students and graduates in 42 countries. Table 1 provides an overview of the respondents. As respondents self-selected to complete the survey, we make no claims about the representativeness of our sample. The high number of education students, for example, will be at least in part because this is our own discipline and hence the home of many of our networks. At the same time, the breadth within the responses is nonetheless useful and adds more weight to the survey findings than would be the case if the respondents all came from a single disciplinary or geographic context.

Table 1. Overview of survey respondents

Category	Responses	Percentage
Gender identity	Woman	80%
	Man	16%
	Non-binary	2%
	Prefer not to say	2%
	Not listed	<1%
Primary place of residence during doctoral study	Australasia/Pacific	40%
	Europe	31%
	North America	15%
	Africa	7%
	Asia/Middle East	7%
	South America	<1%
Field of study	Education	32%
	Other social sciences (excl. education)	21%
	Sciences	20%
	Arts and humanities	17%
	Engineering, design, and technology	5%
	Business and management	4%
Enrolment status	Ongoing	66%
	Graduated	26%
	Under examination/corrections	6%
	Leave of absence	2%
	Withdrawn/dropped out	1%

The survey contained a mix of open- and closed-response questions. For this paper, we draw on the subset of survey data that relates to aspects of care, with care being defined broadly to include caring for self, for others, and indeed for the world. Table 2 lists the survey questions (other than demographic questions) that responses were drawn from for this paper.

For the closed-response questions, we used simple frequencies to identify responses relevant to care. For the question around major life events, response options that were considered relevant to caring for others were: *Parenting/caregiving responsibility for child/ren*; *Had a new child/ren (including adoption)*; *Abortion, miscarriage, or stillbirth (yours or your partner's)*; and *Caring responsibilities for others (not children - e.g. elderly relatives, siblings)*. Response options that we considered were relevant to caring for self were: *Physical health issue/s that affected your daily life;* and *Mental health issue/s that affected your daily life*. For the question around the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, *I had significantly increased caring responsibilities due to Covid-19 (e.g. had to home-school my children or care for other family members)* was coded as relevant to caring for others, while *I was affected by 'long Covid'* and *I experienced fear, anxiety, or distress related to Covid-19 that affected my daily life* were coded as relevant to caring for self. While some of the other response options to this question may also have implied a need for care for self (e.g. *I lost some or all of my employment due to Covid-19's impact*), we took a conservative approach in only selecting the two response options which we felt most obviously related to a person's health and wellbeing.

Table 2. Survey questions used in this paper

Question	Response format
What reason/s led to you undertaking some or all of your doctorate by distance?	Multiple response options, tick all that apply, plus "Other, please specify" option.
Which, if any, of these major life events did you experience during your doctoral enrolment?	Multiple response options, tick all that apply, plus "Other, please specify" option.
In what ways, if any, did the COVID-19 pandemic impact your life during your doctoral enrolment?	Multiple response options, tick all that apply, plus "Other, please specify" option.
In what ways, if any, did being a distance/off-campus student affect (positively or negatively) your supervision experience?	Open response
In your view, how is undertaking (some or all of) a doctorate via distance different from what it might be like undertaking a doctorate as an on-campus student?	Open response
Please tell us about some of the barriers you faced due to undertaking (some or all of) your doctorate via distance.	Open response
Please tell us about some of the opportunities that you feel undertaking (some or all of) your doctorate via distance has offered.	Open response
Please tell us about some of the strategies you used to help you undertake your doctorate via distance.	Open response
Please tell us about some of the successes you can identify in relation to your experience of undertaking a doctorate via distance.	Open response
What advice would you give to others who are undertaking, or preparing to undertake a doctorate (or portions of a doctorate) via distance?	Open response
Is there anything else you would like to share related to your experience of undertaking doctoral study/research via distance?	Open response

For the open-response questions, Author 1 began by reading the full data set for familiarisation purposes. She then identified portions of the data that related to the research focus of the present article (remembering that the questions as shown in Table 2 were broader than just the care focus of this paper, and so some data related to other aspects of respondents' distance doctoral experiences). Any text that explicitly or implicitly referenced a caring relationship, responsibility, or action was extracted, as was text referencing any

aspect of health and wellbeing (including mental, physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual aspects) or other relevant topics (such as coping, work-life balance, self-talk, and support).

Following Saldaña (2021), Author 1 then used descriptive coding to note the forms of care that were evident (e.g. 'care from supervisors'; 'care for self'); process coding to identify actions and impacts associated with this care (e.g. 'care demands overtaking/interrupting study'; 'working with (not against) self'); and values coding to identify respondents' feelings, values, or beliefs (e.g. 'failure'; 'gratitude for supervisory care') in relation to their experiences. Pattern coding (Saldaña 2021) was then used to group and connect the various codes and provide a structure for reporting the findings that are presented below.

Findings and discussion

Distribution of caring responsibilities

Through responses to the closed-response question about life events during the doctorate, 275 students (53% of our 521 respondents) identified that they had caring responsibilities for others. As shown in Table 3, *parenting/caregiving responsibility for child/ren* was the most common form of caring responsibility (reported by more than one in three respondents), but *caring responsibilities for others (not children – e.g. elderly relatives, siblings)* was also reported by more than one in four respondents. More than one in ten respondents had undertaken both these modes of care, whether simultaneously or at different points over their doctorate. Of the 275 carers, 203 (74%) identified as women, 31 (11%) as men, and 3 as non-binary (1%). The remaining 39 carers (14%) did not disclose their gender identity.

Table 3. Caring responsibilities among 521 respondents

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Parenting/caregiving responsibility for child/ren	181	35%
Had a new child/ren (including adoption)	45	9%
Abortion, miscarriage, or stillbirth (yours or your partner's)	13	2%
Caring responsibilities for others (not children - e.g. elderly relatives, siblings)	138	26%
Both caring for children (any of the 3 responses above) AND caring for others (not children – e.g. elderly relatives, siblings)	62	12%
Total with any care responsibilities	275	53%

While previous literature indicates that distance pathways may be important for doctoral students with caring responsibilities (Burford & Hook 2019), we were surprised by how large the number was within our sample - more carers than non-carers. The survey was not focused on care nor specifically promoted to those with caring responsibilities; it was a survey for anyone undertaking doctoral study solely or partly by distance. Thus, the high proportion of carers among respondents underscores the relationship between distance doctoral study and caring for others. The predominance of women carers among our respondents aligns with wider evidence surrounding the inequitable gendered distribution of care work more broadly (Goldin

2021). However, the presence of carers of other genders within our study is important to note and provides concrete evidence to support calls for the acknowledgement of a diverse array of carers within distance doctoral education contexts. Finally, the notable number of respondents who reported care types other than parenting adds weight to calls for a broadened view of care in higher education, where, to date, parenting has been the primary care relationship considered (Moreau & Wheeler 2023).

When asked how Covid-19 had impacted their life during their doctoral enrolment, 122 students (44% of the 275 carers, or 23% of all respondents) reported having significantly increased caring responsibilities resulting from the pandemic. In terms of the gender distribution, a significant increase in care responsibilities was reported by 45% of the 203 women carers in our study, 45% of the 31 men carers, 66% of the 3 non-binary carers, and 35% of the 39 carers who did not disclose their gender identity. While some sources suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic amplified inequities related to axes of social difference (gender in particular), our data adds a layer of complexity. Carers across genders in our sample had to shoulder additional responsibilities due to the pandemic.

Overall, the findings to the closed-response questions reveal that many distance doctoral students are engaged in care for others including, in some cases, multiple types of care or care that intensified due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Given this landscape, we now turn to other survey questions to better understand how these distance doctoral respondents experienced the care they were engaged in.

Being distance doctoral student carers

The closed-response question around the reasons students undertook doctoral study by distance reveals the importance of distance pathways for doctoral students with caring responsibilities. 114 students (41% of our 275 carers) selected *Parenting/caring responsibilities made it difficult for me to study on campus* as a motivation for their engagement in distance study. Of these 114 students: 61 (22% of our 275 carers) also selected *Studying by distance was the best fit for my situation*; 48 (17%) selected *Studying by distance was the only way I could make it work*; and 43 (16%) selected *I prefer studying remotely/from home/by distance rather than being on-campus*. Distance pathways are known to be important for higher education students with caring responsibilities (e.g. Dodo-Balu 2018; Shah et al. 2014; Stone & O'Shea 2019), and the data in our paper confirms this at the doctoral level too. Additionally, the '*best fit*' and '*prefer'* framings of distance study add important counters to the idea that distance is only something students would 'settle for' if they could not make on-campus study work. We resist deficit framings of distance modes (see McChesney et al. 2024) and argue that by choosing to study off campus, these respondents and other doctoral students may be enacting Fisher and Tronto's (1991, p. 40) articulation of care as 'everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible'.

Within the open-response data, there were certainly comments that articulated an appreciative view of distance doctoral study as a study mode that enables care for self and others. For example, describing the opportunities associated with distance doctoral study, one respondent wrote: 'Able to care for my children while doing my degree; able to find and undertake paid work while doing my studies. Studying via a distance gave me the flexibility I needed, and I could set my own schedule'.

Another student wrote:

> If I didn't have the opportunity to be a distance doctoral [student], I couldn't do this. It can be challenging at times, but I simply could not do this if I had to be on campus for large chunks of time. The flexibility of being off campus is the very thing that allows me to navigate the realities of family life, chronic illness, pandemics, etc.

Comments such as these indicate the important affordances of distance study in allowing respondents to manage multiple roles or obligations, or as Beck and Beck-Gernshein describe it, to 'put a life together under often contradictory and partly incompatible conditions' (2001, p. 126).

Respondents were mindful of the idea of balance across their multiple responsibilities, although whether it was achieved varied with individual students' circumstances. Some felt distance modes of study enabled a healthier balance, with comments that they had been able to 'balance my life and stay motivated' or had managed to achieve 'much better work/life balance' thanks to distance modes of study. In contrast, however, some respondents felt their responsibilities were out of balance. For example: one student wrote: 'The balance is WAY off – [I am] always working and always home'; another mentioned receiving advice around work/life balance but confessed: 'I can't say I have it sorted out yet'. These findings reveal that working off campus can open space for some students to achieve greater study-life integration, yet also that the availability of distance modes is not necessarily a panacea for achieving balance.

The multiple responsibilities held by distance doctoral students with caring responsibilities often seemed to sit in tension at both macro and micro levels. At a macro level, students sometimes had to pause their studies or make major changes in other areas of their lives (e.g. paid employment) to accommodate their care responsibilities, which seemed to be the least alterable. For example, one respondent referred to:

> Being expected to work, take care of family members, and not being given study time by employers … I had to make the decision to keep working or to finish the thesis. There was no way that I could do both. I waited until I could afford the drop in income and then left work to write full time.

At the micro level, students described noticing the tension between study, care, and other responsibilities in day-to-day moments. For example, one student reported:

> Not having defined boundaries between work and home life which induces feelings of guilt if I am working but know that there are household chores or caregiving tasks to do. And guilt when I am doing the housework or caregiving because I'm not working.

These and other students' comments indicated that caring for others could - and sometimes did - overtake or encroach on the doctorate, leading to students reporting feelings including failure, guilt, exhaustion, and/or depression, an affective pattern well documented across previous studies on doctoral students with caring responsibilities (see Aitchison & Mowbray 2013; Burford & Mitchell 2022).

One student felt that studying on campus interrupted the tension between study and caring for others, writing:

> When I'm on-campus, it feels like a gift…facilities and services are supplied to help me research, write and grow. I run into people and have serendipitous discussions about research and academic life, opportunities, etc. It feels like a physical home for my brain-work. When I'm off-campus, it feels like I am taking. Taking time away from family, work, etc…It takes a lot of effort to honour my researcher-self, because those signals (on a day-to-day basis) have to be driven by me.

This student's view is important to note; it counters the view that distance was the mode that best accommodated students' intersecting study, care, and other responsibilities, and instead acknowledges the value of being able to clearly demarcate both space and time for doctoral work. Previous accounts (e.g. Burford & Hook 2019; Leonard 2001) have also documented the ways such spatial demarcations can be made by doctoral students within the home itself, as well as outside of it.

In contrast, some students felt that rather than being in tension, care (especially family/household-oriented care) and distance doctoral study were in synergy. Some students framed 'little breaks to put on a load of washing or tidy a room' and 'doing laundry or other things around the house in "work time"' as positive coping strategies or even successes rather than sites of tension. This finding extends previous studies (e.g. Aitchison & Mowbray 2013), which have highlighted the satisfaction and sense of purpose and agency some doctoral carers describe in being able to attend to both their care and doctoral responsibilities. These quotes from our respondents remind us that in thinking about care, we must remember the meaning and solace it can bring to doctoral students, alongside the complexity and stresses. This finding also links to a wider consideration of the ways students coped and extended care to themselves, which we discuss next.

Caring for self as a distance doctoral student

While self-care is important for everyone, some people's circumstances create a particular need to develop strategies for self-care due to physical and/or mental health considerations. Across our 521 respondents, 266 (51%) reported that at some point during their enrolment, they had physical and/or mental health issue/s that affected their daily lives. Of these, 169 (32%) reported physical health issues only, 199 (38%) reported mental health issue/s only, and the remaining 102 students (20%) had both physical and mental health issue/s that affected their daily lives. Moreover, 167 (63%) of the 266 students who had physical and/or mental health issue/s that affected their daily lives also had caring responsibilities for others. The intersections among these groups are shown in Figure 1.

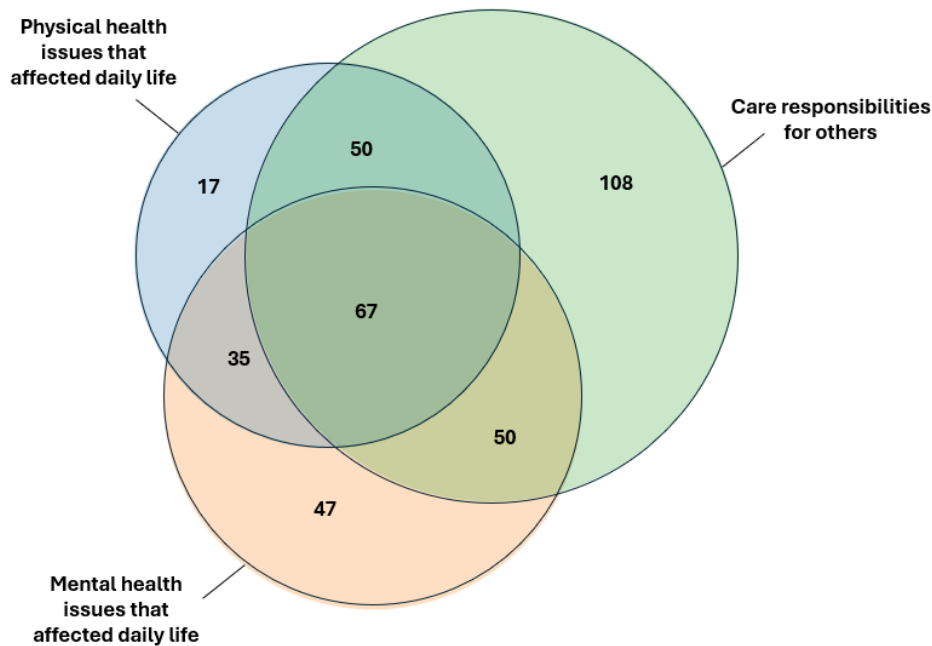

Figure 1. Numbers of respondents who reported care responsibilities for others and physical and/or mental health issues that affected their daily lives

New or augmented demands for care for self were also triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. Forty respondents (8%) reported being affected by long Covid, and more than a third of respondents (183 respondents, 35%) reported experiencing fear, anxiety, or distress related to Covid-19 that affected their daily lives. These findings further extend a burgeoning body of literature which has documented the serious impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on doctoral students' mental health and wellbeing (Dutta, Roy & Ghosh 2022), alongside research on the self-care behaviours doctoral students practised during the pandemic (Stalnaker-Shofner et al. 2021).

In the open-response data, respondents indicated that self-care could be supported by distance doctoral study. They referred to the flexibility associated with distance study, describing how they had leveraged this flexibility to intertwine self-care with their doctoral work. Many of these acts of self-care involved taking breaks, exercising, and/or interacting with nature. For example, asked about the opportunities associated with distance doctoral study, one student wrote: 'Flexibility and freedom – suited my physical health i.e. breaking study with exercise and social events'. Writing about strategies they used as a distance doctoral student, another wrote: 'Taking breaks more frequently, stepping away from my computer and doing something to give my brain a rest, before coming back'.

Another student reported that interspersing Pomodoro[1] writing sessions with walks along the river near their house 'kept me sane and healthy'; this comment signals both physical and mental health benefits and suggests that the student's use of the Pomodoro technique and their

[1] The Pomodoro technique is a well-known time management approach involving timed 25-minute blocks of working (in academic contexts, this is usually writing) followed by 5-minute breaks.

deliberate choice to walk in nature during the timed breaks made what might otherwise just have been a productivity strategy an effective act of self-care. These findings are important to note in a context where previous studies have underlined the challenges that doctoral students can experience in maintaining behaviours that strengthen their wellbeing, such as adequate rest and physical exercise (Perepiczka & Balkin 2010).

For some students, self-care of this nature was a necessity that made distance study the only viable choice. For example, one student wrote:

> With a chronic illness, [distance study meant] I was able to rest at home in between bursts of activity. I don't think I could have done it if the expectation was that I would be 'at work' [i.e. on campus] every day.

For other students, the opportunities for self-care were simply a gift of distance doctoral study:

> I love moving my body – yoga, dance, and, during Covid lockdown, online Pilates was perfect. I frequently take health breaks by walking around my garden, sitting under a tree with a cup of tea, resting my eyes, [and] eating what I wanted to.

In both cases, respondents thus felt more able to engage in self-care due to studying at a distance.

Respondents highlighted the way distance modes allowed them to work with, rather than against, themselves and their needs or preferences. We interpret this self-attunement as an aspect of self-care. For example, one student wrote that an opportunity of distance doctoral study was that:

> I was able to focus more on my health and find out what type of working environment I thrived in. Being able to set my own hours (as no commute or parking woes existed) meant that I found I worked better by starting later, and did not need to 'work' for as long, as I was more productive after having a good night's sleep and waking up when was natural.

The advice respondents offered for other distance doctoral students echoed the idea of using the affordances of distance modes to work with rather than against themselves, with comments like: 'Make it work for YOU and your situation' and 'Find arrangements to make yourself most productive; be connected in whatever way is most comfortable for you; take opportunities and keep what is important in the forefront of life'.

Being cared for as a distance doctoral student

In addition to caring for others and themselves, a final manifestation of care within our data concerned the care that distance doctoral students received from others. This adds a further dimension of inward-flowing care that is not provided by the distance doctoral student themselves but is received by them and thus enables their doctoral and other pursuits.

Students expressed gratitude for the care and support they had received from their supervisors. One student wrote that: 'Distance made my supervisors more important to the PhD process.

[They were] essential to my success'; while another wrote: 'I am grateful for my supervisors who helped me through the bulk of Covid and the struggles I went through dealing with my family and financial circumstances'. These excerpts emphasise the importance of a care-full learning alliance created between supervisor and student (Halse & Bansel 2012), and extend emerging research on how care can be enacted within remote supervision (Wisker et al. 2021).

Interestingly, there were few mentions of care and support flowing *from* respondents' families or partners. One person acknowledged 'cooperation and encouragement from my wife', and another wrote: 'Find and build communities. Loved ones outside of the doctorate/academia are so important'. Aside from these two comments, however, the rest of the data clearly positioned families as consumers rather than as providers of care. One respondent (who had suspended their doctoral study due to overwhelming family and other demands) hinted at the complexity of this, writing that 'even supportive family forget that I'm working on a research project'. The lack of comments acknowledging care and support flowing from family toward respondents may seem unexpected if we anticipate families being key supports in the lives of doctoral students. However, as Grant, Sato and Skelling (2022) have found, when doctoral students come to write the acknowledgements section of their thesis or dissertation, it is not uncommon for them to recognise that the support of families and other loved ones in their educational journeys has been somewhat limited. Building from our study, we suggest that students' lived experiences of receiving care from others during doctoral study seems to be an avenue warranting further research.

By far the main source of care that our respondents talked about was other doctoral students. Peer support and a sense of connection to peers were prevalent through the data, both as something students had experienced (and found helpful) and as something they strongly recommended other distance doctoral students actively pursue. One student advised: 'Find your people and build your team of supporters, advocates and critical friends. Seek out others who are doing something similar or something different—but those who are doing and have done doctoral study'. Another touched on the benefits of this community support, saying: 'Get a support network in place as early as possible … Try not to let yourself get isolated – that spells danger for your personal wellbeing which in turn will start to impact your work'. Looking at our data through a care lens, the pursuit of peer connections can be understood as an act of self-care.

When this peer connection was absent, this was described by respondents as a barrier to their success. Some respondents indicated that studying at a distance made these peer connections harder to attain; for example, one respondent wrote: '[As a distance student] I feel left out and somewhat forgotten, both socially and academically. The daily inputs that help boost work morale, solve problems and get ideas are not so easily accessible [at a distance]'. Others, however, had found strategies to overcome this; one respondent wrote: 'Definitely connect with online communities where you can share your research and be open about all of the struggles and wins that come with doing a doctorate. Try and be an active member of your institution, whether that be by attending online seminars or "check ins" – these small connections make all the difference'. Other students cited social media, networks outside their enrolling institutions, or classmates from cohort-model doctoral programmes as places where these crucial care communities could be found.

Conclusion

Doctoral education research and practice have tended to render both off-campus students and student carers invisible. This paper brings new insights into the important nexus between distance modes of study and care responsibilities for doctoral students, shining a light on students' experiences and perceptions.

While previous studies have found that distance pathways create important bridges for students in higher education (e.g. Dodo-Balu 2018; Shah et al. 2014; Stone & O'Shea 2019), our study contributes by extending these findings to the level of doctoral study. Care was prevalent across our dataset with: more than half of our 521 respondents reporting that they had caring responsibilities for others; more than half reporting personally experiencing physical and/or mental health issues that affected their daily lives (thus indicating particular needs for self-care); and almost a third of respondents reporting both care responsibilities for others and personal physical or mental health issue/s that affected their daily lives. These figures may also be augmented by other forms or care contexts that respondents engaged in but did not specifically report (and our survey did not explicitly ask about), such as care for pets, incidental forms of care for others, or other aspects of self-care.

For our respondents, care intersected in complex ways with doctoral work and the distance study modality. Many found distance modes enabling or even essential as doctoral students with caring responsibilities and/or health issues. However, there were nonetheless tensions around respondents' multiple roles and responsibilities – including care for themselves and for others – which were not always able to be resolved. Receiving as well as offering care was important to our respondents, and particular emphasis was given to doctoral peer communities as sites of care.

Overall, then, care thus appears to be a significant element of the experiences of this group of distance doctoral students, suggesting that care may likewise be important for other distance doctoral students not surveyed in the present study. We do not claim that our sample is representative of all distance doctoral students or distance doctoral student carers, and we acknowledge that a survey, such as the one drawn upon for this paper, can never equal the depth of insight that more qualitatively rich data collection methods (such as interviews, diaries, and autoethnographies) can provide. However, given the lack of larger-scale data around distance doctoral students, doctoral student carers, or the intersection of these two groups, this paper offers unique insights into the presence and experiences of distance doctoral student carers across a broad range of geographical, disciplinary, and sociocultural contexts. Further research is required to further enhance collective understandings of the experiences of doctoral student carers, and we suggest that a balance of in-depth and broader-scale research would be optimal.

In terms of practical implications, a fundamental implication of this paper is the need to recognise and respond to the cohort of distance doctoral students whose engagement in caring for themselves or for others intersects with their doctoral journey. Stone, Dowling and Dyment (2021) have gone as far as to argue that we must understand online postgraduate cohorts as 'largely *different* from the on-campus cohort' (p. 164), and as a group for whom it is more likely that 'family and work must come first… and study has to fit around these primary responsibilities' (Stone et al. 2019, p. 88). As such, supervisors, institutions, and policymakers must remain mindful that distance doctoral students are a diverse group and that the many factors creating this diversity – including care responsibilities and personal health and wellbeing circumstances that demand responses of self-care and protection – will construct barriers, affordances, and opportunities for students in different ways.

We acknowledge that inclusive and accessible campus-based routes are important and should also be made available for carers in higher education (Hook 2016). However, even as we improve our on-campus offerings, we must continue to recognise that there are students whose circumstances (including care responsibilities for self and others), location, or even preferences mean that they will study off campus. Rather than allowing these students to remain invisible and under-supported, we must seek to better understand how institutions and supervisors can develop more *care-full* doctoral systems and learning environments. While our survey did not invite students to suggest possible supervisory or institutional responses, the clear emphasis on peer connectedness suggests that this should be actively fostered, ensuring that the times, places, and ways students are invited to connect are accessible for distance doctoral student carers.

We also acknowledge that while our framing of this paper has drawn attention to the relative invisibility of doctoral students, distance doctoral students, and distance doctoral carers in higher education, in/visibility can be a double-edged sword. At a micro level, for an individual to be visible in the fullness of their intersectional identities and complex circumstances may require a risky disclosure of personal circumstances or an exhausting amount of self-advocacy within an institution still governed by normative constructions of the ideal or typical student. In such cases, individual students may prefer to 'keep their heads down' and make the best of their circumstances without attracting attention that they may fear could generate further pressure or discrimination. At a macro level, however, we suggest that distance doctoral students and carers *as groups within higher education* must become more visible constituencies if we are to achieve our aspirations for equity in doctoral education. Studies such as ours that highlight the experiences of multiple students in these equity groups shine a light on such students' experiences and, we hope, will contribute to informing more inclusive practices.

Finally, we echo Stone, Dowling and Dyment's (2021) stance that when considering students' diverse circumstances, '*difference* should not be mistaken for *deficit*' (p. 165, emphasis in original). While this paper has focused on how care was manifested for our distance doctoral student respondents, it is also beholden upon us as supervisors, researchers, and institutions to enact an ethic of care towards this group of students. The wisdom of care scholars reminds us that we are all engaged in 'a complex, life-sustaining web' of care (Fisher & Tronto 1991, p. 40) and that teaching (construed broadly here, to encompass postgraduate supervision and other practices of higher education) is itself underpinned by care (Noddings 2012). Noddings' challenges to us all as teachers – to listen to students, to think with empathy about their experiences and perspectives, and to 'create a climate in which caring relations can flourish' (2012, p. 777) – offer touchpoints as we seek to better understand and respond to our distance doctoral students engaged in care.

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Care as experiential pedagogy: Soil building in social work education

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In this conceptually-oriented paper, we propose *care as experiential pedagogy* as a tentative strategy to build a community of care in and beyond the social work classroom. Using a relational methodology that uses letter writing and text messaging to facilitate theory building, this article first thinks through our attempts to enact care as pedagogy in an academic and broader context often hostile to care. We discuss why care as experiential pedagogy is ever more important in the current neoliberal context. We talk about the politics of care and various conditions that make our care-centered pedagogy challenging, and we consider the groundwork and efforts required in order to make care pedagogy 'work'. We discuss particular strategies that we have engaged in to co-construct care-full classrooms with our students. We finally close with one possible example of how experiential learning can be deployed in the classroom to cultivate communities of care amongst students; one that is (literally) grounded in the metaphor of hot composting and soil building.

Keywords: *neoliberal academy; critical social work; experiential pedagogy; collective care; composting*

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Introduction

As social work scholars and educators, we are curious about how pedagogical approaches can be used in ways that not only teach about social work principles, but also enact them. In the social work practice context, care is central to what we do, yet our ability to perform and encourage this act in the classroom and education setting is severely compromised. Despite our genuine interests and intentions to facilitate transformative learning among our students, our teaching inevitably operates within a system that devalues care within ourselves and for each other. In this context, 'care', a seemingly straightforward practice and concept, becomes politicised. So, how do we practice care as pedagogy in our classroom?

Our commitment to care-centered pedagogy is informed by our bodies of intersecting privileges and marginality. These subject positions are central to the way that we enact care in the classroom. Chizuru is a migrant settler originally from rural Japan. She is a first-generation university graduate, who came to settle in Canada as an international student. She is a mother and primary caregiver of two young biracial and bicultural children, one of whom is neurodivergent. Her care work in the classroom is heavily shaped by her mothering role, the gendered expectations she grew up with in rural Japan, her experience of racialisation and minoritisation as English as a Second Language (ESL) in Canadian postsecondary institutions, and her social work experience with migrant communities. She occupies a privileged space of tenure-track professorship in the academic industry, though she consistently wonders about her belongingness in academia. This wondering often manifests in wanting to support students who similarly question their place in academic institutions. She is committed to walking alongside students, but struggles to set the boundary in her care work with minoritised students as she witnesses the failures of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives at postsecondary institutions.

Marisa is a white, cis, settler, who is also disabled and queer, parenting neurodivergent children, one who is also intellectually disabled and who has a lot of complex contact with medical systems (often referred to as a child with medical complexities). Her encounters with disability, collective care, and queer kinship (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 2022; Bradway & Freeman 2022) shape the way that she shows up as an educator, and the ways that she navigates access friction (Tsing 2004; Hamraie 2017) in the classroom. While Marisa foregrounds and centres care in her classroom, she tries to support students to build communities of care amongst themselves, rather than taking on all of the caring labour herself. This move is in part intentional; Marisa is a trained and experienced therapist and has built some professional capacities and boundaries to facilitate the building of caring relationships beyond herself. She is also a sessional faculty member, which places her precariously both inside and outside the academy. This precarious status shapes the way that she does care in the classroom. However, this perhaps more distanced work is also possible as a function of her whiteness; although she is a woman, as a white person she does not experience the same *demands to provide* care as some of her racialised colleagues (Spence 2021; Manango 2024).

This paper came out of our ongoing conversations about how to enact care in the classroom in sociopolitical conditions that devalues care. We met during the graduate program and remain to be each other's solidarity team (Reynolds 2011a) as we continue our work as social work educators. We are committed to supporting each other in the difficult moments of our work, and often exchange emails and texts when we encounter challenges.

In this act of care and solidarity, we noticed something was emerging theoretically and practically. This led to us using letter writing and text messaging as an emergent method to

bring the ideas contained in this paper together (Adams 2023; Mackinlay 2022; Flemming 2020; Stamper 2020). Because this paper thinks through care in the classroom, we wanted to use a method grounded in relationship, which we believe is fundamental to care. Combined with Richardson's encouragement to view 'writing itself as a mode of inquiry' (1994, 2002; cited in Adams 2023, p. 12, italics in original), we believe that this mode of inquiring together through letters and texts allows something creative to emerge. The letters and text messages we exchange are moments of witnessing how our co-conceptualisation is coming together; the moment when our theorisation is happening dyadically, and collectively in that we are bringing in other thinkers and beings to inform our theorising. While most writing and thinking together cannot be done divorced from relationship, this thinking through relationship can become obscured in the typical 'smoothing out' of relational process that academic writing normatively demands. We therefore render transparent our collaborative thinking when working through how we mobilise and cultivate care in our classrooms and with one another. Letters and text messages are delineated using italics. This move is a deliberate ethical practice in the context of academic norms that privilege professional performance and narrative smoothing. The selected segments of letters and texts are signposts of our developing ideas about care as experiential pedagogy.

While we were the only present conversational partners in the development of this article, our work is indebted to scholars in disability studies and disability justice, anti-colonial scholars, Mad scholars, activist scholars, social work scholars, and scholars of Asian American studies and Black studies. We also owe our theorising to care relations in our lives - our children, partners, students, mentors, communities and Mother Earth. While our intervention (and we) are located in social work pedagogy, with all of its tensions and possibilities, we hope that the ideas contained throughout will find resonance with educators and scholars in other disciplines.

Using these scholarly and positional entry points, this article first thinks through our attempts to enact care as pedagogy in an academic and broader context often hostile to care. We discuss why care as experiential pedagogy is ever more important in the current neoliberal context. We talk about the politics of care and various conditions that make our care-centered pedagogy challenging, and we consider the groundwork and efforts required in order to make care pedagogy 'work'. We discuss particular strategies that we have engaged in to co-construct care-full classrooms with our students. We finally close with one possible example of how experiential learning can be deployed in the classroom to cultivate communities of care amongst students; one that is (literally) grounded in the metaphor of hot composting and soil building.

The politics of care in social work and academia

We are both educators and scholars in social work. Our disciplinary and professional background, along with our own subject positions we shared in the introduction, inform the way we approach care in the classroom. For these reasons, we would like to first contextualise the relationship between care and social work. Care is central to what we do. We are invested in care of people and communities, and social work education is supposed to help and prepare students to do that work. However the care work in our profession has long co-existed with violence (Chapman & Withers 2019; David 2023; Rossiter, 2011). Care, when it operates within the dynamics of colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, capitalism, and white supremacy, can be, at best, patronising and at worst, violent. In the name of benevolence and care, we have actively been involved in the eugenics movement, colonial education, removing

children from their families (including but not limited to Sixties scoops, Millennial scoops[1]), forced institutionalisation, deportation, etc. (Blackstock 2020; Chapman & Withers 2019; Joseph 2015). Social work, particularly on Turtle Island (colonial name: North America), where we both live and teach, has both historically, and currently, deployed kindness and care for 'the unfortunate' by the 'benevolent' (often middle class white woman) and has been a key mechanism for driving the colonial, eugenic, and class surveillance work of the state (Chapman & Withers 2019; Joseph 2015; Margolin 1997). We therefore need to think very carefully about what practices are taken up as care, and for what purpose. Sometimes what gets understood as care is 'niceness', an enactment of the moral subject (Heron 2007) and white civility (Coleman 2016), which is often an impediment to care and justice. Chizuru, in her letter below, offers a discernment between care and niceness or 'fixing it' with students. 'Fixing it' is often individualised niceness and a performance of the moral subject (Heron, 2007), but perhaps not care as it does not challenge structural inequity in solidarity.

> *Dear Marisa,*
> *I've been thinking a lot about how care and caring manifest in our work as social work educators in the academy. I often reach out to you about how to support students, and I think I do it because I always wonder if I am doing it 'right'. Being trained in critical social work means that we deeply think about how seemingly innocent acts like care and caring can easily turn into trespassing, then harm (Rossiter 2001). I am afraid that my care for students may turn into that. Of course, it does not stop me from caring for students, but it does mean I need to pause and think about how I may understand and enact 'care'. You said before that fixing their problem is not the same as care, nor is feeling bad about not being able to fix their problem. I think you are right. I have to admit that when I encounter a student with needs, I tend to focus on their immediate and individual needs and try to amend the situation. This, of course, is not necessarily a bad thing and can be important, but I cannot stop there, nor is it sustainable. We are increasingly seeing a larger class size and students with high needs in the classroom. Yet, we do not have enough resources to support them. The growing needs in our class can no longer be about individual students nor the responsibility of individual instructors. How do we care for them and each other collectively and ethically? I would like to think more about this with you.*

In our classrooms, we encourage students to think and reflect on how care can become a site of oppression for people who do not fit in an ideal citizen subject. As social workers, we cannot escape this history or contemporary system that continues to reproduce violence as we enact care in our work. However, we are interested in a pedagogical approach that re-imagines care and intervenes in the violence that takes place in professionalised social work. We want our students to be aware of the danger of care that historically has operated to control, discipline and punish the population. We want our students to catch themselves when they become complicit. We want our students to enact care in a way that honours the agency and dignity of people and community in their work.

[1] In so-called Canada, the Sixties scoops and Millenial scoops refer to two periods of time when Indigenous children were removed en masse from their families into the child welfare system, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands. Overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare continues today.

To facilitate that learning, we need to model what the reimagined care can look like in practice. Yet, we often fail to enact the care that centres on the holistic and complex needs of our own or our students in the social work classroom. The neoliberalisation of universities prioritises productivity, efficiency and standardisation, where the pursuit of profit takes precedence over the pursuit of knowledge and the well-being of students and faculty (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg 2017; Morley 2023). The market-driven ideology has led to larger class sizes, reliance on sessional teaching, implementation of corporate mode in management and evaluation, overemphasis on employability as a measure of student success, and reliance on international students as income-generation capital. These structural and material conditions of the neoliberalised university are coupled with a growing obsession with Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) as their strategic direction (Grewal 2021). As Grewal rightly points out, EDI efforts have often focused on increasing representations from certain demographics in different roles without asking what happens after. In a neoliberal university, there is no place for genuine care for these bodies because it costs money, and quite honestly, it is inconvenient to implement meaningful structural support (e.g. if a neurodivergent faculty member needs more time to prepare for coursework or grade papers, is the university willing to hire a Teaching Assistant for them?). Faculty, staff and students who are traditionally excluded from the academy find themselves either struggling to exist (and pushed out), or leave the academy entirely because the system that we enter into is fundamentally unchanged despite the rhetoric of EDI.

Khúc (2024) talks candidly about how Asian American students suffer and die because of structural violence in postsecondary education. Drawing on Asian American Studies and disability justice, Khúc suggests that the conventional approach to mental health - treatment or increasing access to the treatment - is not the answer: ‘the existing industry and scholarly understandings of mental health are part of the problem, and we need new frameworks to better identify and tend to our unwellness, together’ (p. 5). Instead of medicalisation of mental illness, she invites us to think about how the structures produce Asian American unwellness and how to dismantle them. Though Khúc focuses specifically on Asian American students, this argument has relevance to other minoritised students who have been recruited into university industry as part of EDI project.

The structure of unwellness Khúc talks about is particularly important in social work education because, despite the emphasis on self-reflection, the ways in which ‘we are differentially unwell’ (p.21) and we are all in need of ‘care’ are not taken up meaningfully. The neoliberal ideology seeps its way into how social work is taught, where competency and marketability are prioritised over critical thinking (Macias 2015), which positions social workers as professional helpers, thus not the ones who are in need of care. In reality, many of our students and instructors occupy the positions of carer and cared for in and out of social work. In order for social workers to disrupt the professionalised and institutionalised understanding of care that have led to historical and contemporary harms, we need to re-imagine what care is and how to enact it differently. We propose that the classroom is the best place to begin its reimagining.

Situating care

> *Dear Chizuru,*
> *I keep coming to the screen to write this section and I falter. In part this is because I am having difficulty reckoning with taking up disability justice (Sins Invalid 2015) and healing justice (Page & Woodland 2023) in this context. These concepts are deeply rooted in movement work and I don't want to take*

> *them up casually, or appropriate them. This happens a lot, not only in institutions (although it happens there!) but I've also seen it in communities I'm involved with as a caregiver to my disabled kiddo with medical complexities. I've seen parents call themselves disability justice advocates, but without the necessary politic and commitment. Without the context. I'm just naming this wrestling - let's think together about it a bit more.*
>
> *I was also reading some of Jasbir Puar's (2017) work on debility and who can even claim disability and who is sacrificed/experiences debility through colonial, imperial, and genocidal projects... So I am just feeling uneasy in my attempts to write this up at the moment... also in the context of disability claims in our classrooms and my own etc…*

To take up care in the classroom, we draw upon multiple concepts from disability justice and healing justice activists and scholars (Khúc 2024; Piepena-Samarasinha 2018; 2022; Kaba 2021; Sins Invalid 2015). As Marisa discusses above, we do this work tentatively, as in institutions, both the university as institution and social work as institution, these concepts are often taken up cavalierly and divorced from context. So while we can say that our work is influenced and shaped by concepts emerging from disability justice, we do not call our work disability justice. Just as we hesitate to call our work decolonial, as decolonisation requires re-matriation of land, concrete action, and dismantling settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang 2012), we instead locate our work in an anti-colonial politics. Similarly, we locate our work in alignment with disability justice but do not call this work disability justice as such.

Drawing on disability justice however, we do commit to interdependence, self-determination and autonomy, collective access, collective responsibility, following the lead of those most impacted, anti-capitalism and anti-ableism, intersectionality, and healing and transformation in our classrooms (Sins Invalid 2015). We try to do this in deed and not only in word. These commitments, and the actions that flow from them, are essential in a context in which we are all unwell (Khúc 2024). We know that students are coming in from diverse contexts and experiences into the university classroom, where being a 'good student' often requires that they perform in ways often aligned with denying themselves as whole people. This performance is demanded of students differentially depending on social location (e.g. racialisation and white normativity). Students are often promised equitable environments on the surface ('Look at our commitment to EDI', 'Behold our support resources', 'See the shiny diverse faces on our literature'), without actual care.

> *Dear Marisa,*
> *People ask 'Why do you care so much?'. But I cannot help it. I cannot help but care because I see so much of me in the struggles that students face. University is not a kind place. Academia is not a caring place. University fails miserably in the care work of students. We/they get F-. It is particularly unkind and uncaring for people who are not meant to be in it. The universities say they are committed to EDI. The part of EDI is to include more traditionally-excluded bodies in academia, BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+, disabled, Mad, working class, single/sole parents… We applaud ourselves for diversifying students bodies. But this is performative care work. What we don't realise is that EDI efforts cannot stop at the door. It needs consistent care to make sure that they survive and thrive. We conveniently forget that they are whole people. They bring gifts as well as baggage. We don't get to just enjoy gifts. We need to*

> *honour their baggage too. This means that academic institutions need to be prepared to carry that baggage with them. Sure we have an accessibility office, wellness centre, counselling centre, and accommodation office, and they help students to a certain degree. But they are not enough. They are not enough because they still operate within neoliberal structure where efficiency and individualisation of problems take precedent. The care that addresses collective unwellness (Khúc 2024) is what we are lacking, and oftentimes the burden of caring and the baggage will fall on individual instructors or support staff who themselves are misfit to the norms of academia. The invisible labour, the nitty-gritty work of EDI, is carried out by the products of performative EDI. How ironic.*

Sometimes the baggage described by Chizuru above manifests in a misplaced loyalty to the institution, or a felt sense that we need to stay in harmful environments to protect others from that same environment (Ahmed 2017; Jaffe 2021). This personal and individualised sense of responsibility and care, while often deeply felt and genuine, often absolves systems of the responsibility of creating real structures of care.

> *Text message from Marisa to Chizuru: You might not get replaced. And also you can't absorb the failures of the institution.*

In our classrooms, as social work educators, we are not only responsible to care for our students, to meet them in their whole personhood, but we also believe that care itself can be an experiential pedagogy. The students we teach will emerge into the complicated and institutional profession we have described previously, and will be asked in these contexts to care. The way that we do care in our classrooms shapes the way that they may do care in their future work. In this way, the work we do in our classrooms must be aligned to the kinds of principles and actions we want them to take up as they enter their work. In the context of the historical and present violence of the profession, how do we want them to negotiate and navigate that context? We would argue that the experiential learning bound up in developing communities of care, and experiencing a kind of critical care in our classroom helps them to envision ways of being and acting in their work to build communities of care aligned with disability justice.

Care as experiential pedagogy

To situate care as experiential pedagogy, it is important to first contextualise how experiential education is taken up in social work education, to then discuss how we are mobilising the concept in this article. Put simply, experiential learning is learning by doing and learning through experience. Experiential learning theory is process oriented, taking students through a process of experience, analysis, experimentation, and reflection (Almeida & Mendes 2010; Roberson 2019). While experiential education can take many forms, probably the most recognisable in social work is field education, it can be found in many of our practices in the classroom including role play, writing and presenting policy briefs to a panel of classmates, and student organising catalysed in a community social work classroom that students take outside the classroom.

With this conceptualisation then, we posit that the act of developing communities of care amongst students, in the classroom, goes beyond the individual enactments of care by educators and students. When we consider care to be an experiential pedagogy, we intend that students

and educators co-create communities of care (experience), think about what they are doing together (analysis), engage in repair when ruptures arise (act experimentally), and finally reflect on the process alone and together. We believe that this way of working with students helps them to build capacity and practices to meet the conditions of social work, fully embedded in dynamics of social control, structural inequities, and structural abandonment, with courage and solidarity, even if their actions are inevitably insufficient and imperfect (Rossiter 2001; 2011). The correspondences below showcase the process of our collective conceptualisation of care as pedagogy and our use of gardens and composting as useful metaphors.

> *Dear Chizuru,*
> *I've been chewing on an idea from our previous conversations… While I know that you and I enact care practically in our classrooms, taking care to consider our students as whole people with a variety of access needs, and designing assignments, grading, and classroom activities to meet access needs (institutionally recognised or not) accordingly. This labour is, of course, important. But I also wonder about the ways that we have been in conversation about how to support the building of communities of care in our classroom. That is, not centering ourselves as the providers of care, the caregivers, the enactors of emotional labour, as the institution would demand of us. Rather, I am curious about how we support students to build communities of care in the classroom that can carry them forward. Isn't this also what we want them to do when they leave our classrooms? When they go out into practice? How do they find their people, and act in relationship with them towards justice? How do they care for each other and support each other in difficult times? We talk concretely about doing this work with clients, but what does it look like when we are holding each other up? I think sometimes when we talk about caring labour in the classroom, in the university, we might miss this piece; and I think this missing piece contributes to what we understand as burnout. Of course there are times when we need to concretely enact care with individual students. But the building, the catalysing, the cultivation of caring communities amongst our students, across difference is just as important, if not more so. You've described so beautifully in our conversations how you do this with groups of students in your class. I'd like to hear more about these interventions.*

> *Dear Marisa,*
> *Whoa, yes you are darn right. Thank you for reminding me that caring is not simply an individual act or responsibility, though it is often framed that way. What I have been noticing in academic institutions is how care is framed as collective responsibility, but still remains within the individual realm. So the counselling centre, the accommodations office, and the student wellness office saying that they don't have enough staff to respond to growing needs of students, and to address the gap, individual instructors and program staff are asked to support students in their capacity. They say they are empowering us to effectively care for students. They say student support does not just fall under the responsibility of the counselling office or wellness centre. We should all be supporting students. On one hand this makes sense, but on the other hand, it is another mechanism of neoliberalisation of academia. And I think individually I do a shitty job in caring for students. I never feel I have done enough, and of course I never will because as you say I cannot absorb the failures of the*

institution! So you are right, we need to be thinking about enacting and mobilising care differently. Community building as care. Holding each other up as care. Solidarity team as care.

What you say about the community of care in the classroom reminds me of the work I do in the garden. In the garden, you first need to set up really good soil. Sometimes soil is compacted due to excessive stress and stomping, and nothing can grow. To amend the condition, we need to feed nutrients in soil, and I love composting for that. The composting is magical. The wastes, things that we want to get rid of, can turn into something beautiful and so good for soil. The balance is the key - you need to put the right amount of nitrogen and carbons. You need moisture but not too much. You cannot add too much acidity because it kills bacteria that help the composting process. You need to turn the composting pile, but not too often because it needs to rest. You need to observe carefully with your visual, olfactory and tactile senses. Does it look like organic matters are breaking down? Does it smell bad? Does it contain too much water when you squeeze it? If things are not looking well, then we intervene. Maybe a bit too much water, maybe too much nitrogen. Maybe too much acidity. But with the right balance, good companies (e.g. red wigglers, potato bugs, microbes, fungi), and patience, it generates heat to decompose the waste into black gold. Our unwanted becomes nutrients for soil that care for other beings to survive and thrive. This even happens in the middle of winter!! It is so rewarding to see the heat coming out and active lives happening when it is dark and cold.

I wonder if our care work as social work educators is like that, to tend the foundation of a garden. Setting up the space for composting where students can come together, fostering good balance among each other through listening and sharing (without too much sourness), and turn their challenging experiences into nutrients that support others. This sure needs care and patience, but a different kind. It is the care work that is slow and underground but sustainable and far-reaching if it is done right. So we don't actually sow seeds or do growing for them, but rather simply setting up the ground where students can begin to enact care for themselves and others.

Dear Chizuru,
I've been a bit delinquent in writing back to you this week because I have been exhausted. There is so much happening and I'm feeling so much. And while the communities I live in are often good at caring for each other, I've noticed that with everything going on everyone around me is so depleted and have been for a long time.

Students, staff, and faculty at my university are organising a day-long sit-in for Nakba day this week. I've been watching with interested in, and in solidarity with, students and faculty internationally standing against genocide, and speaking up for a Free Palestine. I don't know what it will look like here - if it will go beyond the day, if structures of care will be organised around this action, but I have been impressed with the communities of care and structures of care built around encampments elsewhere. Taking care and making sure that people's nutrition, medical, spiritual, and safety needs are met, including those of children. I've heard of some encampments setting up libraries, prayer

areas, low scent areas, and healing circles. This is not unusual in movements, and it points to what kinds of worlds we want to build.

I was involved in organising childcare for a recent event in my community, and one of the childcare volunteers set up a wonderful watermelon activity for the kids - with a teaching about Palestine and signs that the children could carry at vigils and rallies. It was really beautiful, and a thoughtful way of integrating why we were there with the practical act of childcare.

I think that some of this relates to your compost metaphor in your previous letter. The reason people are coming together is not good; genocide, occupation, and war. A demand that universities divest from the structures that make these possible, especially corporations that fund the Israeli military, directly or indirectly. BUT what is emergent in the context of these important demands are provisional communities of solidarity. Communities that attend to the diverse needs of the people in that community. And these are communities reaching beyond themselves, coming together for communities beyond themselves in some cases. Quite beautiful. While I think that it is the responsibility of faculty to support and defend the students who are the catalysers of these actions, I also think it's up to us to follow the lead of students too. Perhaps we can take these lessons into our classrooms when thinking about cultivating the soil for communities of care.

Text message from Chizuru to Marisa: I cannot believe we are talking about composting but in a strange way I think it fits. So I have a story to share. I think I told you I am working on garden at my child's school. One of the parents was already involved in starting a pollinator garden so we decided to work together. One of the first things that needed to be done was to loosen the soil in the area where we plan to plant. The area is rock hard, like it is being stumped by kids that no grass or weed is growing. It seems like there was no life in it. So we decided to turn the dirt to loosen. It was really hard work, because some areas just don't budge, so much so that tools broke. But we made some progress, and the best part was that the soil was not dead after all because I began to find a lot of worms in one area!!! What we are going to do now is to put some compost in it, to get lives in there with help of microbes, then some top soil, then plan shallow rooted plants in the area that is really hard, but in the areas where we were able to dig deeper, plan deeper rooted plants. Then hopefully all of them work together to give more lives and nutrients back to the soil. And I was thinking about this experience in relation to our paper, that I think sometimes, the ground will be too hard to have conversations because it has been stumped on so many times over the history, but we could still try to put nutrients back in soil to loosen it and depend on other beings to support the ecology. And the soil is never really dead (like worms and microbes still exist).

Dear Chizuru,
I'm really appreciating your formulation of structural injustice and the related context as compacted soil. Deep transformative work requires more than the surface institutional work of EDI. We don't want students to perform the act of planting - to simply repeat back the language of anti-oppression without depth or attending to the complexities bound up in practice. We don't want them to

> *respond to difficult situations with statements that flatten out the complex relational, structural, and ethical intricacies of our work into soundbites. We want more than annuals that whither in the July heat; we want them to have frameworks that stand up to the challenges they will face in their work and lives going forward. For this, we need to build communities of care in the classroom where they can have the deep experiences and conversations that build capacity for justice-doing (Reynolds 2011b) and reckoning with quotidian harms (Sharpe 2017), as much as possible.*

To do this work of transformative learning (hooks 1994; 2003), we propose that care in the classroom must be more than a one-way relation, from the instructor to the student, or even from student to instructor, or students to each other. We propose that it must be bound up in experiential pedagogy.

Pedagogical interventions to actualise care as experiential pedagogy

If we are to build the growing conditions for care in our classroom, and catalyse the conditions of community care amongst our students, such work requires intentional starting practices. Building on the metaphor of gardening and composting, we propose an activity that builds on the common practice of developing community guidelines in the classroom. This is one example of many possibilities of enacting care as experiential pedagogy. While community guidelines, and ground rules for classroom discussions, can be important for developing classrooms that enable student participation, we wonder what more they can do. We find that, at times, community guidelines are developed and then fade into the background. We call upon them when there is a conflict that needs resolution, but they are not necessarily foregrounded in the ongoing discussions. Moreover, their development can at times be truncated; perhaps they are handed down by the instructor as 'rules of engagement' without any engaged effort by students. Or perhaps they can be perfunctory - just an exercise we do at the beginning of each semester, not dissimilar to ice-breaker activities - met with unenthusiastic partial engagement, and not a deep practice of community.

As previously discussed, social work has often been complicit in the perpetuation of structural injustice, colonialism, and genocide, often disguised as care and justice. As such, especially in social work classrooms, community guidelines need to centre on the structural violence that oppresses people with a shared understanding of justice principles and shared commitment to resisting injustice and inequality. Otherwise, the community guidelines, a set of agreed upon ground rules for important dialogue, may become another tool of control or sanction. We would want to be careful not to weaponise notions of civility against marginalised students who speak against violence and injustice (for more on this, see Bates 2019; Berenstain 2020).

Soil and the health of the soil operates metaphorically to help us to consider the conditions we are co-creating in the classroom with students. Good soil health is essential to have difficult conversations from which we can all grow, learn, and thrive; preparing the soil is essential if we want to have good growing conditions. And if we are going to support students to grow from their learning edges, they need a solid foundation that concurrently offers space from which they can grow. Moreover, for some of the very difficult conversations in social work, we need to prepare the conditions for discussion and experimentation. If we want students to feel able to make mistakes and be vulnerable with us and each other, we need to try to co-create a context in which this might be possible. Further, if we want them to carry these practices forward in their work in the field, and build relationships of solidarity that support them to do

this work for the long haul, then it is worth the effort to have them learn this experientially in the classroom. For this reason we propose the following process to develop community guidelines, in the format of a discussion guide to support facilitation of the process. Throughout the discussion guide, the steps of experiential learning theory are present: experience; analysis; experimental action; and reflection. These are woven throughout the process, in a way that scaffolds students thinking and practice of building communities of care in the classroom.

Discussion guide: Building the soil conditions for community care

Discussion prompt 1: What type of soil conditions do we work on? (Acknowledgement of structural violence and injustice and the need for collective care)

When we begin the garden, the first step is to assess the soil condition. If the soil is not healthy, the plants won't thrive or survive. Sometimes the soil is too compacted due to excessive stress and stomping. In compacted soil, its conditions become too hard for water and nutrients to seep through, causing poor health in the soil. Similarly, it is important to think about the soil condition of our learning before we begin the important work of collective care as we grapple with many social justice issues. Social workers work in contexts where the soil/ground is not particularly healthy; it is already harmed and unequal. Inside the classroom, the grounds we share are not equal either. Like compacted soil, the structural violence has hardened the ground that we share inside and outside the classroom. As Khúc (2024) reminds us, we are all differentially impacted by structural violence, who are, individually and collectively, in need of care. This acknowledgement is critical if our aim is to facilitate care as experiential pedagogy among differentially-positioned members of our community. With this line of thought, you are invited to think about individual and collective access needs in small groups. Individual students can share their access needs with group members for support, which then can turn into collective access needs that can be presented to instructors. The shift from 'I need…' to 'we need…' is a concrete way in which care needs are politicised without a sense of individualised burdens and guilt. It is also important to think about the tensions, capacity and limitations. How much are we willing and able to navigate together these imperfect and often harmful conditions? This discussion is not about addressing the structural conditions perfectly; it is about fostering capacity among students to develop provisional communities of collective care.

Discussion prompt 2: How do we feed the soil? (Respect for diverse contributions for collective care)

After we discuss existing soil conditions, we can think about the metaphor of composting as a way to amend the soil. Composting is a process of turning organic matter like food scraps into nutrient-rich fertiliser. Each element of organic matter interacts and plays its role to break down what we originally thought as 'waste' into something beneficial for the soil. There are different methods for composting, but for this activity, let us use the example of hot composting. Imagine for a second that our classroom is like a container of hot composting. Unlike cold composting, hot composting requires more management and care. There are some guidelines to follow in order for it to work. Just like composting, our classroom needs community guidelines to ensure that we are creating a caring environment for our unique contribution to become nutrients for the greater community.

To start hot composting, we need four key ingredients: nitrogen; carbon; air; and water. Each ingredient plays an important role in the composting process:

(1) Nitrogen (green) - protein source for the microorganisms = builder

(2) Carbon (brown) - energy source for microorganisms = mobiliser
(3) Air- keeping things moving = breather
(4) Water - when the air comes in, the moisture from the pile gets evaporated. Water is needed to continue digesting material

You are invited to think about how, for composting to work effectively, there needs to be a good balance among these ingredients. Then, each member is invited to choose an ingredient that speaks to them and shares their gifts and contributions. Think about how your gifts may translate into the classroom (e.g. air = 'I am good at being there for everyone'. 'I am good at breathing through the tension'). As members share, you may literally put organic matter into a bucket OR you can draw pictures collectively of what goes into the composting bin. Document the gifts and contributions each member brings and how they may get translated in the classroom setting.

This activity is designed to encourage you to think about how care is produced interdependently and everyone has a role to play in collective care. The unique gift each student brings to the classroom is acknowledged and students are encouraged to actively use it for collective care.

Discussion prompt 3: What to avoid in the composting pile (Commitment to justice and care principles)

Not all elements can go into the composting pile. Some items cannot be composted at all or will slow down the composting process or be hazardous (e.g. plastic materials cannot go back to the earth; meat, fish or oil rich organic matter will attract rodents; too much citrus will slow down the process of composting; chemicals or dog faeces are hazardous to soil and human health).

Similarly, in the classroom composting pile, it is important to think about what to avoid in the composting pile. Students are invited to come up with their own list of what to avoid in their classroom composting bin, identify why it should be avoided, and discuss the possible remedies/ interventions. This activity is intended to facilitate conversations about justice principles, tension management, and conflict resolution.

Discussion prompt 4: When and how to intervene in the composting process (Importance of process, intentional observation, and reflection for collective care)

The intention here is to facilitate conversations about care strategy. In order for hot composting to work, it needs to be cared for. You cannot leave it hoping that it will work out somehow. The pile needs observation and decision-making on when it should be turned and what should be added. You will need to do this using different senses - sight ('does it look like things are breaking down?'), touch ('it should feel spongy'), and smell ('it should smell earthy, not stinky'). The temperature of the compost pile should be monitored as well. If it is too hot, it may need turning or the addition of more carbon-rich materials. If it is too cold, it may need more nitrogen or more/less water.

Similarly in the classroom compost, we need to create a care strategy. In your group, you are invited to come up with check-in questions/activities that you wish to ask yourself each week regarding how care and caring are going in your group. The questions can be tentative, but they should be aimed at facilitating meaningful conversations that contribute to fostering nutrients in the group.

Concluding remarks

We wrote this paper as we heavily engaged in care work of our students, children, communities, and gardens. Letter writing and text exchanges allowed us to cross the imagined boundaries between personal, professional, and scholarly spheres and became practical and methodological platforms of relational, grounded, and engaged theorisation of care as experiential pedagogy. We focused on the politics of care in social work education, addressing neoliberal and colonial contexts in which care work is asked to operate.

We propose that in order to resist structural conditions that devalue care (i.e. neoliberalism) and appropriate care (i.e. social work), we must foster the social relations that honour interdependence, self-determination and autonomy, collective access, and collective responsibility. To reimagine care, we drew on disability studies and disability justice, anti-colonial scholars, Mad scholars, activist scholars, social work scholars, and scholars of Asian American studies and Black studies. We argue that care must go beyond individualised and institutionalised intervention; it must be grounded in the acknowledgement of structural violence and collective unwellness (Khúc 2024). Care as experiential pedagogy offers a conceptual framework and methods of teaching care by doing (experience, analysis, experimentation, and reflection). We used soil building and composting as metaphors and offered a discussion guide of community guidelines activity that considered conditions, needs, roles, boundaries, and strategies for building care in the classroom. Care as experiential pedagogy is a practice of prefigurative politics where students and instructors strive to create relationships that reflect what we teach in critical social work education, however imperfect that might be. The possibility exists not in perfection but rather in commitment. Our shared soil is surely compacted, but the lives continue to exist underground, and it is our collective responsibility to care for each other, together.

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The day 'care' came up: Agitations for care-full approaches to inspire flourishing academic lives

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This paper presents vignettes of conversations around a politics of care between members of an all-women collective writing group at Western Sydney University, Australia. The collective, affectionately named 'Super Friends', focuses attention on the collective dimensions of writing as a form of care-full scholarship that seeks to disrupt an increasingly competitive and productionist university landscape underpinned by a masculinised 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010). Recognising that writing is relational and rejects traditions of solitude and competition, our collective creates discursive space-time for scholarship, supporting our identities as both teachers and learners. By sharing works in progress, we agitate for ethical and pedagogical approaches to writing and its support (Dufty-Jones & Gibson 2022). The vignettes presented were animated one morning after reading a member's paper on infrastructures of care and teaching praxis. Our vignettes offer a means for interrogating questions we grappled with including: (1) how do we collectively orient towards care work for it to flourish and generate confidence and resilience in Early Career Academics (ECAs)?; (2) what is required to disrupt the co-opting of care practices into neoliberal objectives?; and, (3) how can care allow us to do academic labour differently? Our dialogue aims to provoke the imagining and enacting of alternative academic futures. We consider the multi-dimensional ways in which a collective and affective approach to scholarship leads to conditions that encourage care-full epistemological practices (Motta & Bennett 2018), and the emergence of places/spaces that render caring powerful.

Keywords: *care; writing differently; neoliberal logics; flourishing*

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Introduction

Research, teaching, awards, citations.
They nurture ECAs with dedication.
'Apply for funding', 'hit the ground running'.
'What's your five-year plan?' They keep on drumming.
The noise is numbing.
Leadership, mentorship, 'have you published that paper?'
Your care cuts through me like a razor.

'Books before babies', 'don't get stuck on the teaching treadmill forever'
They say these things with care, urging me to endeavour.
Good advice - caring interventions;
The road to hell was paved with good intentions.

If I told them, it was a good career, was I lying?
I still said, 'we're de-casualising have you thought about applying?'
And then I saw her crying.
'But this is what you signed up for';
Sacrificing sanity for security is the 'care' of neoliberal lore.

Yet amidst the hustle, amidst the strain,
We question, does care remain?

Amidst the doubts, amidst the strife,
We seek a way to redefine our academic life.
Amidst the snare of academic despair,
We strive to build resilience, to repair.

In our circle, hearts laid bare,
We dare to show how much we care.
Mad fucking witches, cackle and laugh;
In our care, we find a different path.

Beyond the confines of neoliberal lore,
We cultivate a space where care restores.
Our 'critical friends soup' is our recipe for care,
To flourish, to build, to dare.
Can our model of care withstand the test?
More importantly, have you published this yet?

What you have just read is a poem written as a 'confessional tale' (Lindlof & Taylor 2011) representing the tensions around 'care' felt by a group of academic women. We invite the reader to imagine a collective of scholars brought together by a desire to imagine and create conditions for a different way of doing scholarship.

> It's Wednesday morning on a Super Friends writing collective day. I'm sitting in a traditional boardroom somewhere in the 'Science' building trying to get some emails done when a cacophony of recognisable laughter from the Super Friends crew makes its way through the corridor. They can be heard, for some time, before I see them file in, with coffees in hand. Perimenopause, imposter syndrome, workloads, raising children, and pet Instagram accounts are amongst the many topics we discuss before we 'settle' into our writing chats. We know each other well. In the act of offering our writing to the collective, often in very raw states, we have forged kinship.

We start this paper with a story and a poem, as a means of writing differently (Gilmore et al. 2019, McLauchlan 2018; Pullen, Helin & Harding 2020). For us, the material production of writing matters to the way we practice care for each other. As a group of academics with high teaching loads and governance roles, finding time to write together was difficult. Producing coherent work meant acknowledging our constraints. Conventional academic writing reproduces and responds to entrenched practices of the production of knowledge (Ahonen et al. 2020; Amrouche et al. 2018; Burke 2021). We want to find ways to question the status quo as 'writing itself is embedded in structures of exclusion that shape who is recognised as having the authority to engage in knowledge-formation' (Burke 2021, p. 24). Writing differently supported us to challenge conventions and generate alternative ways of working.

In this paper, we write to decentre the effects of performance rankings and metrics, the way they permeate writing practices, and the prioritisation of the competitive academic. Instead, we write for relationality, and against individualised academia. We argue for a reorientation towards 'care logics' where affective relations of care are not relegated to the periphery of academic practices (Lynch 2022). Mol's (2008) concept of 'care logics', initially developed in the context of a specific case; treatment of, and life with diabetes, refers to the rationalities or rationales that underpin the *practices* that people are involved in as they relate to 'care'. Importantly, Mol (2008) defines 'care logics' in contrast to 'choice logics', which are underpinned by individual *abilities*. 'Care logics' speak of 'situations of choice' not an individual's ability to make good or bad choices (Mol 2008). For Mol (2008, p. 8) 'logic' is a useful term because 'it invites the exploration of what is appropriate or logical to do in some site or situation, and what is not'. In articulating coherent 'care logics' in the context of her case study, Mol (2008) concludes that 'good' care is not a consequence of highly-skilled individuals making exceptional choices. Rather, good care is an outcome of collective and enduring practices that seek 'to make life better than it would otherwise have been. But what it is to do good, what leads to a better life, is not given before the act. It has to be established along the way... the task of establishing what "better" might be, involves collectives' (Mol 2008, p. 75). In the logic of care, this task is never done, it is ongoing and iterative. In determining 'good', 'worse' or 'better' through practice, collectives must ensure to 'give ample occasion for ambivalences, disagreements, insecurities, misunderstanding and conflict' (Mol 2008, p. 76). In line with Lynch (2022), we see the concept of 'care logics' as a valuable frame for exploring academic practices that support care-full scholarship, particularly our own, as members

of a writing collective operating against the grain of established ways of 'succeeding' in the context of an Australian university.

In our writing collective we practice friendliness and collaboration above competition, and the pedagogical function of being together is asserted in our practices to engaging with each other's writing.

The group's actions are geared towards creating safe spaces and bringing about generative moments for members to share their ideas and writing. We do not expect 'polished' works, instead we invite the 'unfinished' and 'half-baked' works that most of us are afraid to 'show' in other spaces. In doing so, we attune what it means to do academic writing to the complexities of our lives. This has social effects, and an effect on the way we produce knowledge. An emphasis on writing through meeting, talking, and writing together accentuates the collective social dimensions of our lives. These practices also establish a space where care is cultivated. We acknowledge that the concept of 'care' means different things for each of us. Therefore, there is no singular definition of care we adhere to. Instead, we are working through and with care for each other, as a form of collective mobilisation to animate the social value of writing together.

Our approach: Collectively orienting towards care work

The Super Friends

'At this point, we had included an image of Milhouse Van Houten, showing his friend Bart Simpson, the cave where 'he comes to cry'. Bart's response is 'cool'. Because of copyright laws, we can't actually show the image. However, in the spirit of writing differently, we implore the reader to imagine this scene… or Google it, like all academics do'.

In our case collectively orienting towards care work meant creating a space for writing. The writing group, affectionately named 'Super Friends' is an offshoot of Critical Friends, a pilot project formed to address a need for supportive writing spaces, where collegiality and care are centered. The Super Friends initiative is supported by the Critical Pedagogies Research Group (CPRG); a research collaboration within the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University. We started with an open call-out to all members of the CPRG. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, this call seems to have only been heard by women. From our first meeting we have been an accidental women's writing group, meeting monthly to take turns in sharing work. There are seven members of Super Friends who contributed to this paper, we are a mix of early/mid-career women, including women of colour from an array of fields of 'social science' including anthropology, sociology, geography, tourism, and criminology. We are a diverse group, consisting of Higher Degree Research (HDR) students, early-career academics, and mid-career academics. Some members have substantial governance and executive roles, others heavy teaching loads. Yet most of us have been around the academy for a long time, often on precarious casual contracts before finding full-time positions. Individually our positionality is diverse. All members describe themselves as working class, two of our members are first in family, and three were born, bred and educated in the Western Suburbs of Sydney. Five members have been part of the decasualisation program at Western Sydney University. One of our Super Friends is a PhD candidate and manages multiple sessional contracts. All members hold governance roles, some of these are student facing. Some members are or have been raised by single parents. Some members have children. Collectively we

have 50 years of sessional contracts, mostly teaching focused. When we count the time, we have spent in the academy, we have well over 100 years of tertiary education, teaching, research work, and governance experience between us.

Autoethnographic intraception & polyvocality

After reading a member's paper on infrastructures of care and teaching praxis, our group realised that we were collectively grappling with feelings and concepts related to 'care' in the academy and that we wanted to confront and potentially 'infiltrate' (Tran 2023) the conditions which we felt restricted or impinged upon our ability to enact care and be cared for. Our exploration for this paper, therefore, emerged out of our conversations about care, followed by a collaboratively-developed series of prompts to which we individually responded to in a shared document. The prompts were designed to help each group member to write personal accounts responding to:

- How do we collectively orient towards care work for it to flourish and generate confidence and resilience in ECAs and HDRs?
- What is required to disrupt the co-opting of care practices into neoliberal objectives?
- How can care allow us to do academic labour differently?

When collating our responses to these prompts, we encouraged a process of 'collectivity' and 'writing differently', opening space for different modes of autoethnographic intraception. The forms of writing produced through autoethnographic works are as dynamic, diverse, and intersecting as the people who create and feature in them. Our autoethnographic modes varied and included reflective writing, diary entries, confessional poetry, visual methods such as photography, meme generation, and use of lyrics (see Küttel 2021).

Four of us approached autoethnography through a diary entry, recording individual personal diaries, observations, thoughts, feelings, and interactions of our daily experiences (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002). One member used poetic autoethnography. Two drew on forms of visual autoethnographies, using photography and meme generation respectively as mediums through which to present, represent, and engage with their reflections. Finally, one member of our group drew on song lyrics as a reflective prompt. In this way we sought to mobilise a 'blending of genres and voices' (Brettell 1997). In the next section of this paper, we explore our entwined personal accounts, entries, musings, and reflective writing to capture our shared experiences, coming together to 'write' with and through these experiences. Following Fortune, Fyffe and Barradell's (2024) 'collaborative autoethnography', this involved working together, building on each other's stories, and gaining insight from group sharing. We independently read our own and each other's narratives closely and came together as a group to discuss and critically analyse the data together. In successive meetings, our discussion was built on our reflections and analysis of the previous meeting/s and returning to the data. Doing so enabled our data generation and analysis to be dynamically iterative and entwined.

The neoliberal imaginary: The perils of the ‘ideal’ scholar

> Academia can be, and is, overwhelming for anybody. ‘Imposter syndrome’ doesn’t discriminate; we all feel it. A caring culture in a university is one that respects, values, and applauds vulnerability. It allows us to feel safe, emotionally and intellectually. It builds an environment where a HDR supervisor can tell a candidate that they don’t know the answer, or a professor can share with an ECA that they are genuinely scared or confused in a task that they ‘should know’. A caring culture means that we can all ask each other for help, and not feel ashamed. We’re all learning, and by allowing ourselves to recognise that we ‘don’t know’ or are overwhelmed, or even that we are emotional beings, allows others to feel that maybe, they’ll be okay in academia, too (Super Friend #4).

The cultural norms of contemporary universities have deep roots in histories characterised by ‘careless’ patriarchy that have been prolonged by the rise of new managerialism (Lynch 2022). Objective, rational science reigned supreme in the construction of the ‘intellectual’ and ‘scholar’ who inhabited universities, whilst emotion, feeling and care were positioned as inferior due to their subjective nature. Lynch (2022, pp. 10-11) argues that the academy both ‘created and consolidated the concept of feminine subservience and academic inferiority’. Because of this legacy, ‘universities as workplaces operate on different relational logics to care relations’. The institutionalised conceptual framing of the ‘ideal’ scholar thus retains a white, middle- to upper-class, masculinised form.

A reflection on the politics of care that encourages the collective dimensions of writing as a form of care-full scholarship requires consideration of what subjectivities are imagined in neoliberal university. If we are to undertake any form of disruption inside a competitive and productionist university, we need to understand what kind of academic is imagined in the neoliberal imaginary. This has implications for our own subjectivities as ‘caring’ academics and the way practices of care are undertaken and valued in university settings. Neoliberalism is a complex set of practices, policies, funding regimes, and discourses (among other things).

As Davies and Bansel (2007, p. 255) note we are often ‘hard pressed to say what neoliberalism is, where it comes from and how it works on us and through us’. Much has been written about neoliberal ‘culture’ in the academy, where corporatisation and managerial approaches have fundamentally changed the core values and approaches of universities (Bottrell & Manathunga 2019; Courtois & O’Keefe 2015; Houlbrook 2022; Lynch 2006). Neoliberal tenets of individualisation, deregulation, efficiency, and privatisation are cultivated through the commodification of education and knowledge. Universities, like the public sector, are commodities subject to market forces that should prioritise performance metrics and rankings to remain competitive (Lynch 2006). The consequence of such an approach is the valuing and devaluing of certain types of academic labour and skills, with a particular focus on research outputs, funding, and competitiveness, over teaching and governance, collectivity and care.

Collisions: When care and neoliberal logics meet writing

When our group talked about the kind of care we need, there was an obvious contrast between how we were framing care versus how the university frames care. Many of our group members actively opposed the university's model of what one group member called 'survival care'. Collectively, we decided that instead of expecting us to be resilient within an uncaring system, that what was needed for academics to thrive (rather than merely 'survive') is a systematic rethinking of care culture within the university. For some group members, this meant a system that encourages and allows us to be vulnerable rather than resilient (Super Friend #3).

> Writing collectively produces outputs that the university divides when counting each individual's 'output'. This forms a disincentive to working care-fully. While Professor Smith, the Lone Ranger, moves up in rank and pay bracket, and gets to eat the spoils of the university, those of us who approach our work care-fully and collectively remain stagnant and must feast of his crumbs to stay afloat (Super Friend #3).

Our autoethnographic vignettes show that Super Friends is a space where members think through the tensions they experience between neoliberal logics and care logics. Group members reflect on the challenges of writing to meet measurable outputs that count. Noting that forms of writing and forms of knowledge that are valued incentivise and reward individuality and competition, while subsequently disincentivising the kind of collaboration and collectivity that enables care to flourish. Mutch and Tatebe (2017, p. 223) contend that 'caught in this system like mice on a treadmill, are academics with increasing workloads, larger classes, more administrative requirements and less time to undertake the kind of scholarship they thought they had signed up to'. Academics are expected and demanded to provide a range of 'measurable outputs and skills, publications, income generation through the acquisition of external grants, international collaboration, and teaching excellence, as well proving that one can do all these things in combination and at pace' (Caretta et al. 2018, p. 262).

How can care allow us to do academic labour differently?

The rise of and critique of 'care' in scholarly literature is seen as a response to the perceived marginalisation of, and discrimination against, certain groups. Feminist scholars, notably Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) challenged traditional Western moral philosophies that were often rooted in masculine, heteronormative representations of the 'good life'. These academics argued for an ethical orientation; an 'ethics of care', which focused upon relationality and experiences in the shaping of the individual. Therefore, through a feminist lens, care is seen as 'everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher & Tronto 1990, p. 40). A 'divide and conquer' approach that undermines collectivity and devalues care work (through, for example, a focus on individualised self-care, see Ward 2015) means neoliberalism runs counter to practices of care and solidarity (Motta & Bennett 2018). However, while neoliberalism has made 'caring more difficult', Tronto (2017, p. 27) contends that care provides an explicit challenge to neoliberalism.

At Super Friends we have found that caring has a significant effect on shaping the quality of our collective social life. However, the invisibility and intangibility of caring labour across various

settings and institutions often makes such work ‘difficult (for some) to appreciate, and thus easier to denigrate, ignore, and undervalue’ (McEwan & Goodman 2010, p. 109). Our members continually reflect upon their frustration with the tensions between the care that the neoliberal university provides us, and the care that we need to sustain ourselves as academics. Our members acknowledge that in the academy, metrics and time organisation actively disincentivise collaboration and care.

> As an ECA, I am precariously navigating this career and learning about the complexities and realities of academic work. I acknowledge that this work exists within a specific system, with a specific set of objectives. For example, research, and the writing process itself, while envisioned as an intellectually creative practice, had sadly collapsed into a set of ‘careless’ measurable units which (un)intentionally signal the (un)successful academic career, no better represented than through the ‘publish or perish?’ mantra. As an ECA, I feel the weight and discomfort with such a mantra and wonder how a sustainable and meaningful career might function (or survive?) within such powerful structural conditions for which refraining from such does not appear like much of an option (Super Friend #2).

These observations are not to say that the university does not provide opportunities for care. It does. The tensions are apparent in that the institution’s care infrastructures are informed by neoliberal logics. Care time that reflects what academics need to sustain themselves is simply not prioritised in the current context of increased workload, distress and external control, coupled with diminishing autonomy, and less control over time management (Ylijoki & Mäntylä 2003). As members identified, finding care within this context requires academics to make their own spaces where the kind of care required to sustain academic careers can be strategically manufactured.

> I think we lack time and space to collectively orient towards care, particularly when care is not on the agenda in most academic spaces. Carving out and creating time and space matters (Super Friend #6).

Our writing collective asserts a politically-informed praxis. Super Friends, as an all women collective, adopts approaches to relationship-rich writing that are underpinned by a robust feminist ethics of care. A feminist ethics of care offers scope for change and resistance to dominant neoliberal logics in that it ‘seeks solutions to the problems of the giving and receiving of care that are non-exploitative, equitable, and adequate to ensure the flourishing of all persons’ (Robinson 2011, p. 33). In regularly coming together to talk and write, we urge each other through moments of self-doubt, exhaustion, and despondency. We acknowledge that neoliberal logics, though dominant, are not uncontested, and that carelessness in higher education is not predetermined; ‘universities can become more caring places for staff and students, not least by developing care-centric thinking and practices’ (Lynch 2022, p. 11). Super Friends contributes towards making universities more caring workplaces by emphasising and centralising vulnerability and relationality in our approaches to writing.

In our group members’ recollections of the kind of care they received from mentors within the university, a collision of care logics was identified. Many of our group members have been mentored by senior colleagues, whether formally or informally, and the university encourages and rewards such mentoring. Mentoring of junior colleagues is commonly considered in promotion

applications. However, our group members revealed that well-meaning senior mentors tended to reproduce the university's neoliberal and masculinised version of 'care'. This 'care' produces tension among our group members. While they are thankful for being given support, they are also somewhat jaded because the 'care' merely reproduces the status quo; a status quo that endorses an unsustainable academic life. This is captured in Super friend #7's analysis of the poem they contributed:

> I don't mean to sound ungrateful or spiteful - these were pieces of advice given to me, for the most part, by people I greatly respected, and it did come from a place of genuine care for my 'academic' career and economic wellbeing. I suppose this is the catch-22 of university life - mentors have a responsibility to teach us the 'rules of the game' in a neoliberal university. Their care was clearly geared towards metrics of success in the neoliberal university. But mentors have a responsibility to prepare me for that to survive the institution. And their advice worked in many ways. But in a sense, it was 'survival care'. Isn't there more - what's the saying - thriving not just surviving. To 'thrive' (to be resilient?) we need more than survival care. And this co-option of care into these modes left me feeling.... I don't know...insatiable...I could never do enough to fill the hole. I felt the opposite of resilient, I felt endlessly vulnerable (Super Friend #7).

Disrupting the neoliberal university: Practicing care-full scholarship

What does it take to disrupt the everyday practices of academic life, to orient them towards care-full work? We found that this involved recognising the many forms of care, and carelessness that we experienced and practiced ourselves, while also being open about how practices affected our work, and what we could do differently. The reflections offered by members of Super Friends bring to light the harms that experiences of care-less-ness can exert upon academics, whilst simultaneously offering insights into how Super Friends as a writing collective affords us with an opportunity to educate ourselves in 'cooperative caring ways'. Lynch (2022, p. 21) contends that a pedagogy around cooperative caring is central to change, noting that 'it will not happen by accident'. Super Friends has enabled the messiness and incompleteness of writing and academic life to be realised. These have included conversations about the numerous challenges which shape the writing experience, including the management of high teaching loads, and all the emotional weight which accompanies such work. It has done so by placing collectivity and emotion at the heart of the writing process and academic work; a process which has too often remained characterised as a set of competitive and individualised practices. The impact of a care ethic has been evident in the transformation of peer review into stimulating care-full conversations that move beyond critique of written words and suitability for publication; to discovering the intellectual context(s), passion(s) and direction(s) which inform our academic selves - why we write and what we want to achieve in our writing.

> Through care, Super Friends has contributed to dismantling some of the individualised, accelerated, and competitive norms which surround research production, providing a nurturing space to do academic work and build an academic self, a little differently (Super Friend #2).

> Taking time to discuss ideas. Being accountable, but accountability is softer and less pressurised. It works better. Not dehumanising, it's more humanising. I still got the article done, but I got it done more mindfully, and there was yeah ... there was time taken to actually engage with it in a way where it was collective, and fruitful, and not just a means to an end, which is what I find tasks end up becoming in this wheel (Super Friend #4).

The personal accounts offered speak to the emotional and embodied effects of the neoliberal university that are often overlooked or deemed insignificant (Ahmed 2014). They are thoughtful, emotional, funny, and sometimes sad. Perhaps more importantly, the sharing of these reflections has further cemented the sense of kinship and caring within our group and reminded us of the power of our shared stories to 'reveal and revise' our academic world (Holman Jones 2005). Thus, while ostensibly we are a critical friend writing group which supports the 'output' of writing, in practice, Super Friends has provided 'time' and 'space' for collective laughter, joy, rage, and sorrow. These emotions, which are provoked at various points during the research writing process, support the balance of research and teaching, and influence the content of our writing. More importantly though, the group has allowed us to reimagine our own individual and collective academic stories; stories 'animated by feeling and imagination' and forms of knowing that need not be stable, coherent, and finished (see Holman Jones 2005, p. 767). Such stories have a dual function. In the first instance, they confront our feelings of 'otherness' against the prevailing individualistic, masculinist, careless modes of extractivist epistemology and knowledge production. They have also become the genesis or origin story of our group, allowing us to start to tell a new story of connection and relationality.

> We have to show others our 'safe' spaces where caring takes place. Super friends; people within academic work groups; some committees; anywhere that like-minded people can be together to care (and rage, rant, and celebrate) (Super Friend #6).

Our autoethnographic accounts show our concerns with care and writing differently for relationality. We argue that these versions of ourselves are important for the creation of care-full spaces of refuge. For us writing differently meant creating space to breathe and move beyond the boundaries imposed on us by the disembodied metrics of the academic institution (Anohen et al. 2020). As Conradson (2003) argues, enacting care entails significant physical and emotional labour, requiring an empathic and mutual commitment to ourselves, and to others. Giving and receiving care relies on building and exchanging trust, disclosure, and vulnerability, thereby making it a collective effort and responsibility. Relatedly, to us writing differently meant writing across boundaries of our disciplines, and across our differences. Opening a space for relationality to flourish required building trust, and encouraging and supporting vulnerability. While this space-making was somewhat iterative, it was also supported by literal and symbolic gestures.

Early on when the group was formed, members divulged intimate details relating to their personal identities, and collectively made a pact that 'what happens in Super Friends, stays in Super Friends'. This began the foundation for trust which was further supported through further literal and symbolic gestures that dissolved hierarchies and power relations.

> Something I really appreciate about Super Friends is how when we come together, we also talk about our lives outside of work. We don't do a lot of this in academic spaces. The focus is always work. There is often this feeling of needing to emphasise your work identity first. You worry that people won't take you seriously if you are thinking about caring responsibilities, hobbies, or something else. I remember a colleague telling me she was told not to talk about her kids in academic spaces, as people won't take you seriously. It's been refreshing to walk into a space where people share about themselves rather than just their work; that their kids are sick, or that the morning was chaotic, or that something non-work related occurred over the weekend and how they couldn't wait to share it with our group because they knew it would make us laugh. I feel like I can be completely myself in this space, and that's something that is very rare for a working-class, first-in-family, ECA. I can take off my serious academic mask and relax a little bit. I don't have to think about what opportunity I might miss out on or be deemed less suitable for if I talk about something non-academic or as mundane as what my family discussed this morning at breakfast (Super Friend #3).

Our academic identities outside of the group might be seen as hierarchically organised by our varying status, position, and age - leading to the presumption that we function in a mentor/mentee web of vertical relationships between these junior and senior colleagues. Indeed, we may have started this way. But as we grew together, members who held senior positions within the university expressed that they planned to leave their executive identity at the door. Their acceptance of the suspension of power was further marked by their agreement to remove artefacts that symbolically conveyed institutional (and masculine) power, such as suit jackets. These literal and symbolic gestures resulted in the wider dissolution of stoic performances among group members, and, in collaboration with shared radical ranting and listening, allowed for our not-just-employee-but-human selves to come to the fore. More-human-than-employee identities shadowed the facades we typically perform to express our professional identities, resulting in a more humanising relational exchange. Such humanisation, which challenged the hierarchical notions of expertise, and colonial and patriarchal models that organise academia (Tynan 2021), enabled the 'joy of deep connection' that emerges when the 'empty, competitive hierarchies of higher education institutions' are suspended (Maile et al. 1998, cited in McLauchlan 2018, p. 88). However, it also provided the pedagogical advantage of allowing group members to comfortably move in and out of 'expert' roles in ways that were conducive to supporting members to strengthen their writing skills, to gain confidence in sharing their knowledge, and moving from beginner, mentee, and learner to expert, mentor, and teacher (McLauchlan 2018).

Intentional togetherness: Practicing care-full relationships

As a group, we have emphasised the value of our presence with each other - in showing up, being together, listening, reading and responding - reciprocity and relationality. We have done so with sick children in tow, and through both personal and professional crises - with an emphasis to 'come as you are', 'when you can', and with work in any stage of development.

> It's my turn to share a paper with my Super Friends again. Normally the sharing of my work provokes a deep sense of fear and anxiety - *this time they'll see me for what I am, an imposter.* But not here. I am excited to share my work here, more

than that, I am excited to *write something for them*. There is a half-drafted mess of an article that has been sitting on my desktop for nearly a year now, there is never time or motivation to finish it, it feels too hard, its edges are jagged, it is heavy with the memory of the participants I interviewed and their experiences weigh on me each time I open the draft. I worry about not doing ‘justice’ to them, and the ethics of me scoring publication points from their stories. But the excitement of just being with Super Friends reinvigorates me, I open the fearsome draft with new eyes, and an intention to write for my Super Friends, to talk to them about the ideas, and what motivated the project in the first place. Some of our emails before the meeting read:

> Hi everyone,
I'm so excited I can come along next week.
I just submit (sic) the paper you all read a draft of earlier in the year to the journal (redacted). Cross your fingers for me! Thanks so much to everyone for your time and feedback on it. This group really helped to give me the confidence to keep going. I feel a bit guilty I haven’t been able to attend Super Friends regularly and return the favour this semester. If anyone does share this time, I promise to give your writing 110% of my attention (Super Friend #3).

>Hi Super Friends!
Your mission, if you chose to accept it, help me make sense of this paper.
I have attached a cleaned-up version (yes, this is the ‘clean’ version) of a (redacted) paper I have been thinking about for a while. I have included the abstract and methods, etc. for context, but I would really like feedback on the ‘Findings’ section and the discussion points that come after this. Much of this is just rough notes and ideas, but I am so grateful for the chance to just talk about some of these ideas! (Super Friend #7).

>Hi everyone,

Can I please have special permission to Zoom today? (Child name) is sick (again! - please pray for me) and my husband can’t come home until lunch time, so I won't make it (Super Friend #3).

>Sure 😀. I hope you are all OK and everyone gets better soon. It's not fun being sick (Super Friend #5).

As shown above, our concern with ‘care’ and building trust foregrounds the sociality of writing, allows for the disorderliness of process, and, above all, supports the writer(s) not the development of products. The breaking down of power dynamics and centring of our humanness enabled a space where care began to flourish.

Not just care in respect of supporting each other to do good work care-fully, but a space where care provided us with generative refuge (McLauchlan 2018). We understand caring cannot offer or guarantee a smooth harmonious world (van Dooren 2014), but we are not arguing it can or should. However, it has helped us design against ‘extractivist’ organisation of labour while

highlighting the 'inescapable troubles of interdependent existences' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, p. 197). We use the term extractivism here to foreground both extractivist labour practices as well as extractivist mentalities that permeate our academic lives (see Alcoff 2022; Tynan 2021). As Tynan (2021, p. 599), a trawlwulwuy woman and scholar explains, 'extractivism sits at the core of colonialism; the extraction of knowledge, labour, specimens, resources, relationships and research. Extractivism can seep into research practices, often in the quest to produce 'original research'. According to Tynan (2021), the inverse of extractivism is relationality - being in good relation - yet relationality is not easy inside an institution that operates in non-relational and extractive ways. Set timeframes, restrictive academic writing styles, hierarchical notions of expertise, and colonial and patriarchal models of data collection, 'discovery' (Tynan 2021, p. 599), and gap finding work against the ethos of relationality, and are often rewarded in academia. Many of our group members have struggled under the weight of such extractivist modes of being and the epistemic insecurity they generate:

> I don't know. When I was an honours student, I was told I shouldn't have gotten the marks I did. When I was an HDR student I was told I wasn't ambitious enough. As an ECA I was told I wasn't writing enough. Think about your h-index. When I got a permanent position, I was told I had to learn to play the game. I hear these comments a lot. I've been hanging around the academy for years. I feel like I should know more about how to be a good academic (Super Friend #5).
>
> Being dictated by the expectations that reflect the university's version of care leaves no time for self-care and significantly reduces our ability to care for others (our students, colleagues, etc.). You cannot count care ... care reflects surpluses of emotionality and labour that can never be counted (Super Friend #5).

To work with a relational ethos on the other hand means *responding* and *listening* with care and reciprocity *despite* these extractivist compulsions, deadlines and timeframes. It is a practice of both agency and kinship that centres relationships, the processes of connection, and the responsibility to treat kin and research with respect. As Tynan (2021, p. 599) reminds us, 'you cannot demand a relationship, nor give it a deadline'. To this, following Dalmiya (2016), we would add that the 'trust' that is necessary for relationality comes in part from the practice of 'relational humility' - the acceptance and even celebration of our own epistemic lacks and strengths in relation to others in the group as well as an openness to other ways of *knowing* and *being*. We actively generate spaces to reimagine and deliver value to move beyond productionist and extractive paradigms embedded in managerial practices, budgets cuts, increased workloads, and constant organisational system changes (among other things). As a group we have found generative refuge and comfort with 'not knowing', relinquishing the status of 'expert', and focusing on the quality and reciprocity of relationships with others.

> See, I'm not so assured
> Nor unusually strong
> Or outstandingly brave
> I'm more just fumbling around in the dark...
> For the bulk of my day.

These words are taken from the lyrics of a Gang of Youths song, 'The Deepest Sighs, the Frankest Shadows', and are written on the whiteboard in my office, along with other quotes (from musicians - yes Nick Cave makes the cut!). Song lyrics remind me, it's okay to '...say the most human of things...' above the most 'expert' of things (Super Friend #1).

Many of my days are stitched together by literal and metaphorical 'zooming' moments. But one afternoon in my rush to leave the office I was stopped in my tracks by an encounter with these guys, a flock of galahs:

Figure 2: Galahs on the lawn at Western Sydney University's Kingswood campus (Taken by Super Friend #1)

> As I stood there captivated by the sight of these birds, I recalled the First Nations storytelling - The Australian Museum project through which I have been learning about how 'Australia's birds play many symbolic roles in First Nations cultures. As carriers of story, they teach us how to live in connection with other living beings'. I took the photo because I was struck by the reminder of birds as 'carriers of story' and I wondered, what these birds, at that moment might teach me about connection (Super Friend #1).

The above picture taken by Super Friend #1 was revisited many times by the group who found affinity in its rich symbolism (see Hunter 2020, and Radley & Taylor 2003 on the usefulness of photography in autoethnography). The use of visuals in this way helped to 'excavate deeper, nuanced insights' (Pope 2016, p. 289). And, as Scarles (2010, p. 2) compellingly argues 'where words fail... visual autoethnography opens spaces of understanding; transcending the limitations of verbal discourse and opening spaces for creativity and appreciation, reflection and comprehension'. Galahs are a common Australian parrot and are known for their distinctive pink and grey coloring and loud call. While many Australian species suffered dramatically or became extinct because of settler invasion, the galah has thrived in changing environments, especially in rapidly urbanising areas. While Super Friend #1 pondered on the galah as a symbol of connection, so too did the galah become an analogy for our own survival and flourishing in academia. The ability for the galah to insert themselves into new and uncomfortable scenarios; to just be and maybe even 'thrive', strengthened our own resolve. The galah survives as a collective, or a flock, and maybe we do, too.

Figure 3: Meme created by Super Friend #6 on approaches to care

Generating spaces for confidence, resilience and flourishing

We are learning as we go, and generating spaces that prioritise listening, collective knowledge making, and system change takes time, involves commitment to the process and careful thought about the design and function of the group as we continue. This is a lively process that aims to build trust while exploring and accepting difference. As with the feminist writing group described by McLauchlan (2018), our group members express the ways that the 'lively, trusting, intellectual connection' between women encourages vibrant thinking, and in turn a greater sense of resilience, and confidence:

> My own writing has been invigorated by the conversations we have in the group. I am encouraged towards a constant criticality of the systems and structures that I navigate as I perform different roles in the university. I am reminded that I can show up in different ways in different spaces and still be whole (Super Friend #1).
>
> I brought a draft paper to the group from some research I was doing. Before sharing it I was really anxious about how authoritative I could be. I'm only an ECA and I was sort of dancing around the failure of government in addressing a serious social justice issue. The group were like 'hmm this paper is good, but I think you could go a bit harder, you are the expert here and you have the evidence to back yourself up'. I remember leaving the meeting feeling way more confident. The group assured me this was important work, which inspired me to keep going. Sometimes it's hard to feel motivated to finish a paper on a topic that's important to you because the emphasis on metrics and securing funding and industry partnerships can make you feel like you should be expending your energies more strategically. The group helped me remember why I wanted to be an academic in the first place and who, and what, I wanted to be researching and writing for (Super Friend #3).
>
> When I think back to when my paper was discussed at our Super Friends meeting, I came out feeling way better about it all. Receiving a rejection from the journal was really hard but bringing the 'rejected paper' to the group was not. After venting about the publishing process and listening to the group's ideas about where my argument could go, I was motivated to re-engage with the paper and see the resubmission process through. This was not only because of the feedback and support received from my Super Friends, but also because I felt accountable to them - they read my work, they listened to me. They showed they cared not only about my paper, but about me. And I care about them too. I probably wouldn't have bothered with resubmission had it not been for Super Friends (Super Friend #2).

Our writing collective, Super Friends, then represents a space and avenue for affective care relations to emerge and develop. We exist as an act of dissent and resistance to neoliberal approaches to scholarship; we are deliberate in our efforts of undoing the notion of writing as solitary and competitive, and moving towards forms of radical relationality. By radical relationality, we are referring to 'relations of care' and ways of being in 'good relation' as a concept and idea shared by feminist philosophy and indigenous feminist and decolonial ethics (see, for example, Yazzie 2023; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). For Yazzie (2023, p. 596), radical relationality is 'a story about kin. Not necessarily the kin we are born into, but our chosen kin, the kin we make

through political struggle. It is a story that offers a thriving and capacious vision of kin, a story that speaks to the radical power of kinship to inspire our dreams of liberation'. It includes relations of care and responsibility for land, place and space as much as people (Garroutte 2003) - what Mushkegowuk geographer Michelle Daigle calls 'geographies of responsibility' (2019, p. 709). For Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) it evokes ways of thinking with care, and how we come to imagine relations as a means of worlding. By thinking, writing, and even crying together, we are proactively shifting the epistemic underpinnings of our identities as academics. Our time together produces a pedagogical re-orientation toward writing 'care logics' and relationality that position 'scholarship as a site of learning through cooperation' (Lynch 2022, p. 20).

> For me, academic work needs to be done with care and around care so that we not only 'work at our institutions' but also avail spaces and opportunities to 'work on them' (Ahmed 2012 as cited in Dufty-Jones & Gibson 2022, p. 341). When the opportunity arose to join a 'Super Friends' writing group, I saw a potential to 'work on' how writing and research can be reimagined with and around care, in ways which, while in line with institutional expectations for research production, do so through implementing pedagogies which challenge the typical 'careless' and often accelerated pace at which we are expected to work (Super Friend #2).

Engaging in collective forms of writing came from the need to critique contemporary knowledge production models and practices of knowledge creation. The publish or perish mantra continuously intervened in the fabric of our academic lives, promoting individualist social relations and neoliberal values associated with being an academic. We wanted to question these models, practices and ways of being 'an academic'. For us, writing collectively enabled moments of togetherness and opened critical discussion, giving us time to actively question models of writing where 'outcome' and 'output' are central to our daily academic subjectivities. Like our Super Friends writing spaces, our methods, and our approach to writing differently reflect a 'fusion', which McLauchlan (2018) describes as a lively shared experience. In Super Friends we are feeling our way through university structures as they prompt emotions such as desire and anxiety. We are responding to these structures by being open to what care means collectively. As McLauchlan (2018, p. 90) argues, becoming open to getting 'on the same page' with one's co-conspirators is vital. Autoethnography then is a means for forging more creative selves and creative cultures (Holman Jones 2018). Following Holman Jones (2018, p. 229) our use of diaries, poems, reflections, and images engages us as a group in a 'process of becoming', shows us 'ways of embodying change' as we collectively produce versions of 'knowing' and 'being' and 'caring' that center affect and relationality. Engaging in care is not only (inter)personal, but political, reflecting an act of collective mobilisation. Through an ethics of care, Super Friends has cultivated a community of trust and support, encouraged vulnerability in academic work, and humanised the writing process. Echoing Cunliffe (2018, p.16), who refers to the importance of choosing our significant academic others, Super Friends has provided a space for friendly, collegial relationships to flourish; relationships which see us 'talk, laugh, debate, and whine'. Such interactions translate into enactments of care to 'conserve energies' (Dufty-Jones & Gibson 2018) across research and teaching, build confidence, develop resilience, and begin the process of nurturing a healthier academic life.

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