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Critique and contestation at Work

Elina Meliou
Aston Business School

Ana Lopes
Newcastle University Business School

Who Cares? Contingent academic work and the ethics of care during the Covid-19 crisis.

Progressive marketization (Muller-Camen & Salzgeber, 2005) and corporatization (Huzzard, Benner, & Karreman, 2017) of higher education in many parts of the world, mainly due to the adoption of neoliberal governmentality into academia, have led to the precarization of the academic labor (Bristow, Robinson, & Rattle, 2019). Intersecting with these transformations, the Covid-19 crisis has been further operationalized as the reason for redundancies and hiring freezes (Ahmed, Behbahani, Brückner et al., 2020), thus causing increased reliance on the contingent, fixed-term or zero-hours employment (e.g., Bahr et al 2021). In the UK, which has one of the world's largest academic job markets, with a workforce of 440,000 people, 34% of academic staff are employed on fixed-term contracts (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020). A further 71,000 staff employed on atypical or zero-hours contracts contribute 25–30% of all university teaching (University and College Union, 2019). In total, 54% of all academic staff in the UK are in contingent contracts (Megoran & Mason, 2020), which are disproportionately held by women (Minello, 2020; Advance HE, 2018).

We adopt an ethics of care lens (Tronto, 1993; 2013), to examine the experiences and negotiations of 39 contingent academics, through an articulation of the university's caring process unravelling during the Covid-19 crisis. In their widely cited definition of care, Fisher and Tronto (1991) specifically recognize the relational, asymmetrical, and multi-directional components of care, by conceptualizing it as "everything that *we* do to maintain, continue, and repair '*our* world' so that *we* can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Tronto 1993: 103, emphasis in original). Tronto (1993) advocates an approach to care as an ongoing process, consisting of analytically separated but interconnected phases*,* which involve taking the other's concerns and circumstances as the basis for action.

Despite the aggressive transformation of the academic labor into "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), universities cast themselves as caring institutions (Lund & Tienari, 2019; Liedka, 1996) that care about (Tronto, 1993) their employees' needs and students' desire for quality higher education, based on research and academic expertise (Cantini, 2017). In the context of lockdowns and social distancing around the globe, *taking care of* (Tronto, 1993) was co-opted to manage the rapid transformation of academic labor toward a new normal. According to Tronto (1995), *taking care* of involves assuming responsibility for the identified needs in the caring process and the acknowledgment that one can act to address the unmet needs through *care-giving*. *Care-receiving* encompasses the recognition that caring needs have been met. However, the caring process does not always unfold gracefully, and care is not equally distributed or rewarded. It is often the case in bureaucracies that those who determine how needs will be met are far away from the actual *care-giving* (Tronto, 1993), thus creating imbalances between *care-giving* and *care-receiving*.

As the Covid-19 pandemic intensified the imbalance between care-giving and care-receiving to transform academic labor, the unprivileged have been less likely to care

successfully (Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen, 2020; Mackenzie, & McKinlay, 2020). However, little attention is paid to those in non-permanent, contingent contractual situations. Their voices are largely absent from the inquiry into academics' experiences and advocacy (Sadlier, 2022). Their experiences of academic *care-giving* during the Covid-19 crisis, when suffering is ubiquitous, require empirical examination.

An ethics of care (Tronto, 1993; 2013) lens allows for a greater understanding of the complexity of the neoliberal university caring process, which has significant political and moral implications. Identifying the ways in which contingent academics' work and lives have been transformed during Covid-19 forces us to think concretely about contingent academic labor. In doing so we can problematize what is (under)valued in the neoliberal university, to reveal the deep, often hidden, power asymmetries and inequality between those able to provide care and those who need it. Conversely, key to our conceptualization of the ethics of care is the agency of those unprivileged or the "power of the weak" (Tronto, 1993:143), in the caring process. Our analysis explores how *caring with* each other (Tronto, 2013) enables contingent academics to negotiate academic care-giving. The caring with practices of women contingent academics, as actors who have traditionally been excluded in the neoliberal university, foreground the relationality and interconnectedness of care, to underpin a commitment to justice and democratic processes.

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