

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Gendered precarity in higher education

Subversions, strategies, survival

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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue brings together contributions from contrasting contexts to explore ways in which higher education learning and teaching is affected by precarious working conditions and ways in which this is gendered. The articles here address precarity in three different geographical contexts: Western and Northern Europe, represented by the United Kingdom and Sweden; Central-Eastern Europe, illustrated by Hungary; and South America, exemplified by Colombia.

KEYWORDS

belonging, discrimination, gender, higher education, insecure contracts, precarity, neoliberalism

In the past decade, there has been widespread concern about the rapid increase and misuse of temporary contracts, leading to precarity for many academic staff (Gupta et al. 2016). There is a growing body of literature relating to precarity in neoliberal higher education and the ways in which this is gendered (for example, Bataille et al. 2017; Murgia and Poggio 2018; O’Keefe and Courtois 2019; Zheng 2018; Zbyszewska 2017). Attention has begun to turn to the impacts of these working conditions on university teachers and teaching (Kahn et al. 2024; Lopes and Dewan 2015). Here, we bring these concerns together, considering the impacts of gendered and

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interrelated precarities on learning and teaching conditions alongside possibilities for subversion and resistance.

Precarity has multiple and shifting meanings within the social sciences: The term ‘precarity’ is often anchored to its origins in referring to insecure, part-time and casualised employment contracts and working conditions, brought about by capitalist exploitation (Sennett 1998; Standing 2011). It has also been conceptualised more broadly in relation to social precariousness (Butler 2009). For Butler (2015: 33) experiences of precariousness are politically induced and create vulnerabilities, rendering lives unliveable for sections of populations that ‘suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death’ (see also Butler 2004, 2009). Precariousness is highly contextual and may be differently understood and experienced across the globe with populations differentially affected by wider forces such as climate change, coloniality, war and displacement. Both conceptualisations are present here; precarity in terms of short-term contracts and their immediate impacts and broader experiences of precariousness are understood as intertwining processes that position and affect people in particular ways depending on their circumstances and geographical and social locations. It is therefore important to bring an intersectional lens to bear, seeing ways in which gendered, racialised, classed and ableised positionalities affect how precarity might be experienced and understood in context. Beyond contractual status a state of precariousness may be brought about and affected by political upheaval, poverty, discrimination, migration and enforced mobility alongside ongoing histories of exclusion and marginalisation – within and beyond the academy. In the context of academia, precarity can have overlapping material, social, affective and epistemic dimensions and can be experienced as dehumanising (Blell et al. 2022; Ivancheva et al. 2019; Mason and Megoran 2021; Morris, forthcoming; Morris and Rowell, this issue). For Mason and Megoran (2021) precarity is dehumanising in that it renders individuals invisible, leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, denies them academic freedom and hampers them in constructing a life narrative.

Globally, many universities have adopted a neoliberal business model, shifting to a view of higher education as a profit-making enterprise necessitating marketisation and the imposition of management techniques derived from the private sector (Deem 1998; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). That model requires constant restructuring and creates uncertainty, render-



ing sections of the workforce as disposable (Sennett 1998) with the effect of continuing and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities within academia (Reay 2004). Studies have identified ways in which academic precarity and job insecurity disproportionately affect women, Black, Asian and minoritised staff in Western neoliberal contexts. Alongside the consequences for careers, these conditions often have detrimental personal, affective, health and financial effects. Barriers to careers such as lack of access to childcare, structural inequalities and sexist academic cultures are often compounded by precarity. Processes of commodification of higher education and limited resources mean that fields where there tend to be a higher percentage of women – especially in social sciences and humanities subject areas – are continually under threat (Bozzon et al. 2018). Steinþórsdóttir et al. (2018) draw attention to how this creates additional structural barriers for women’s careers in terms of funding, publication and promotional opportunities. Academic women on insecure contracts are often faced with difficult life choices and trade-offs, such as postponing childbearing (Alderson 2023; Paksi et al. 2022). Instability and financial insecurity, alongside gendered expectations in relation to care, mean that women may be less prepared than men to remain working in these conditions. Shardia Briscoe-Palmer and Kate Mattock (2021) note that in an increasingly competitive job market there is pressure to quickly obtain multiple skills and competencies. This further contributes to the gendered structural barriers faced, particularly by women from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds or with disabilities, who may experience multi-levelled forms of discrimination and have less access to support and resources. In turn, access to development opportunities, networking and mentoring can be negatively impacted by contractual status, thereby compounding isolation, exclusion and discrimination. Yet Francesca Coin (2018) observes that academic work is often presented and internalised as a labour of love, especially for women, which can lead to working overlong hours doing high-level labour and enduring hardship and isolation in the hope of opportunities for permanent work. These complex factors thus come together in exacerbating exploitative conditions and unequal gendered power dynamics. Concerningly, precarious employment can mean that women are more vulnerable to abuse and harassment (Cardwell and Hitchen 2022; University and College Union 2021; Wånggren 2018). Epistemic injustices can stem from the low status accorded to women, and Black, minoritised and working-class women in particular, who have tended to not be seen as ‘knowers’ in academia and are more likely to have

their authority challenged (Blell et al. 2022; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012). Precarity can also be detrimental to academic freedom and autonomy (Blell et al. 2022; Read and Leathwood 2020; Vatansver and Kölemen 2022).

Research to date indicates that precarity profoundly impacts on learning and teaching in numerous ways, affecting pedagogical relationships; curriculum development, preparation and delivery; and continuity of academic and pastoral support. Importantly, precarity undermines research-informed teaching due to an overuse of teaching-only contracts (in some contexts), heavy workloads and lack of opportunity for research and development (Read and Leathwood 2020; Rowell and Morris 2023). Moreover, there are detrimental impacts on the everyday lived experience of academia for those working on temporary contracts in terms of access to resources, status, esteem and development opportunities, alongside material insecurity (Clavero and Galligan 2021; Loveday 2018). Precarity can be felt in embodied, affective ways, often as shame (Read and Leathwood 2020). It can also have devastating effects in relation to confidence and self-belief (Clavero and Galligan 2021); such experiences are hardly conducive to positive learning and teaching environments. Due to an insidious deprofessionalisation of academic teaching, staff can find themselves overloaded with little space and time for their work, isolated, marginalised and trapped in dead-end jobs with poor prospects for career progression (Ivancheva and Garvey 2022; O’Keefe and Courtois 2019; Read and Leathwood 2018). This potentially has severe consequences for research-informed teaching and teaching quality. Some institutions segment the tasks of preparing, delivering and marking and divide the work between groups of casualised academics in an institution, meaning they may not be involved in the whole teaching cycle, thereby undermining continuity for students. This also creates new forms of disconnection and alienation for staff. Lena Wånggren (2018) has also highlighted the fragmentation that can occur in teaching when staff are juggling multiple contracts and institutions. Yet, simultaneously, teaching metrics and requirements for quality and ‘excellence’ in neoliberal contexts add weight to customer service-like student evaluations, placing further performance pressures and emotional labour on these academics whose livelihoods may depend on good feedback. It should also be noted that student evaluations often carry prejudices against women and those from minoritised groups (Heffernan 2021). Rhys Williams (2022) observed a correlation between casualisation and poor student feedback; this reflects how these academics may be negatively perceived due to the lower status they hold in contrast

to permanent staff members. It may also reflect poor working conditions and under-resourcing, for example having little preparation time and not having access to office space to see students (Read and Leathwood 2020). These conditions, far from enhancing quality, are likely to have detrimental impacts, including constraining experimentation, risk-taking and the introduction of topics deemed ‘controversial’ in learning settings, which may include gender and other social justice-related content (Read and Leathwood 2020; Morris et al. 2022).

Conceptualising gendered precarities in neoliberal academia

The articles in this Special Issue cover a range of theoretical conceptualisations of both precarity and gender, as well as mobilising a variety of additional theoretical perspectives, approaches and concepts to tease out the complexities and nuances of the dynamics under scrutiny. Németh, Lőrincz and Felföldi, Tardos and Paksi, and Castelao-Huerta (this issue) all point out that in their own national contexts (Hungary and Columbia respectively) the concept of precarity needs to be expanded to encompass the insecurities of permanent but low-income employment experienced by many academics, with the consequent need to supplement this income from other sources.

The concept is also utilised in a wider sense to explore not only the consequences of insecure or inadequate conditions of employment on people’s economic and social circumstances, but also how the complex effects of such insecurity affect people’s thoughts, feelings, sense of self and social belonging. There is a strong thread through this Special Issue of a focus on emotions and the affective. Tardos and Paksi mobilise Ivancheva and colleagues’ (2019) distinction between contractual precarity and affective precarity to understand these broader dynamics. Emotions and the affective are also a strong focus of Lundmark, Jonsson and Hansson and of Morris and Rowell (this issue), who look at how precarity *feels* in day-to-day life at the micro-level. Lundmark and colleagues recall memories of complex, nuanced classed and gendered dynamics involved in ‘the feelings of being allowed to exist in the academic room, as opposed to the experience of feeling disparaged and ignored’ (p. 48). Morris and Rowell also include analyses of their own memories of intense affective associations with sometimes liminal spaces such as the café. Some spaces were felt to be more or less welcoming, for example through the influence of the interactions with other staff and students in different spaces. Some spaces also potentially allowed



for the bodily expression of emotion in the notoriously ‘emotion-free zone’ of the academy (Hey and Leathwood 2009). In this context, crying can be a disruptive act (Hacker 2018), as well as potentially opening up possibilities for enacting challenge and resistance.

Other theorisations of precarity here include Butler’s broad conception of precariousness that encompasses all experiences of insecurity and destabilisation that are socially located and politically induced (Butler 2004, 2009). Castelao-Huerta (this issue) combines this insight from Butler with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) theorisation of capitals to explore how low-paid senior women academic colleagues in Colombian universities attempt to mobilise and transfer resources to students and others in even more difficult circumstances.

Other articles in this issue combine a theorisation of precarity with other social scientific theorisations of power, privilege and disadvantage in relation to aspects of identity and positioning. Lundmark and colleagues apply Joan Acker’s (1990) theorisation of gender and intersectionality in relation to organisations, allowing them to conduct a multilayered analysis. This includes, as we have mentioned, a focus on the micro-level – distinguished by Acker as the *interactive* and *performative* levels, referring to power dynamics between individuals on the one hand, and learning to perform an ‘appropriate’ gendered self on the other. However, it also allows for a connective analysis at broader systemic and symbolic levels, relating to organisational structures and the production of legitimising symbols and images respectively. Exploring ‘levels’ of power dynamics in a slightly different way, Morris and Rowell utilise Puwar’s (2004) theory of how space works to construct and perpetuate inequalities, mapping the ways in which space can mark out who is constructed as belonging or not belonging in the space of the academy, contributing to the degree to which someone is considered a ‘legitimate knower’ (p. 129).

Another strong thread throughout the Special Issue is a theoretical focus on the dynamics of neoliberalism, which is pervasive in academia in many parts of the world, and linking this directly to the exacerbation of existing inequalities through precarisation. For example, Németh and colleagues directly link the gendered patterns of inequality in Hungarian academia to the intense competition engendered by the effects of neoliberal education policies. Morris and Rowell also connect their auto-ethnographic work to wider neoliberal discourses: the deprofessionalisation of academic work, the division of research and teaching and the relentless categorisation and



accountability that especially works against ‘othered’ embodied subjectivities. Castelao-Huerta also shows how academic colleagues in Colombia who have permanent jobs are still experiencing the detrimental effects of neoliberalism. She innovatively employs the slang term ‘rebusque’ to connote a specific way of being and doing, in order to ‘show how a practice associated with lower classes in Colombia is translated into neoliberalised academia’ (p. 20). The articles combine to contribute a powerful multilayered analysis of the link between neoliberal policies and practices in the academy and detrimental conditions of social, affective, epistemic and material precarity.

Methodological insights

Since experiences of precarity in academia are highly contextual and dependent on both country-specific factors, such as labour legislation and funding models, and organisational factors such as discrimination, based, for example, on ethnicity, gender or class, it is necessary to use different methods and empirical materials from various settings to deepen knowledge of this multifaceted field. The articles here demonstrate a broad methodological range and draw on studies from diverse empirical settings, including contexts in Hungary, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Colombia. For instance, ‘The precarity paradox’ by Tardos and Paksi and ‘The gender pay gap among young academics’ by Németh et al. both focus on Hungary as their empirical context but deploy different methods. Tardos and Paksi study the impact of precarity on female PhD holders within the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) field using semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups, while Németh and colleagues analyse the gender pay gap through a statistical analysis of an online survey of Hungarian scholars under the age of 45 with PhDs.

Morris and Rowell use auto-ethnographic methods to explore the dynamics of precarity in the United Kingdom. By walking around the university campus and sharing memories – a method described as ‘bimbling’ (Moles 2008) – they connect spatial theory to memories of belonging and not belonging. Lundmark and colleagues employ various empirical methods within an overarching case study, to study how ideas of practical and theoretical knowledge are negotiated and how they impact on precarity at a Swedish university. Like Morris and Rowell, Lundmark and colleagues activate personal memories in their study, but they combine them with an analysis of how the subject of Media Technology is presented on the



university's official website, as well as on various social media platforms used by the teachers and students. Castelao-Huerta uses semi-structured interviews to draw out experiences and insights into how female professors in Colombia support precarious students and postdoctoral researchers in their studies and research careers.

Collectively, these articles highlight the importance of contextual and methodological diversity in studying academic precarity. This not only deepens our understanding of how precarity is manifested in people's lives and how it is managed in different academic environments, but it also emphasises the complexity and context-specific nature of academic precarity, ultimately contributing valuable insights to the field.

Key themes

While the methodologies, theoretical underpinning and main focuses of the research conducted vary considerably across the articles included in this issue, insecurity, work overload, gendered inequalities, ambivalence and dissonance constitute overarching features of academic careers according to the findings on precarity in higher education and academia.

In the Western and Northern European region, gender equality is in principle more developed than in the other two geographical contexts (Central-Eastern Europe and South America) covered in this Special Issue. In this region, Morris and Rowell and Lundmark and colleagues use methods linked to activating personal memories to assess the multilayered feelings and reflections on personal experiences related to precarity and temporary contracts. Morris and Rowell focus their research on spaces and places of the university campus to recall experiences of exclusion while being on temporary teaching contracts. Through the 'bimbling' method, the authors substantiate the ambivalent feelings of 'belonging and not belonging', being an 'almost-academic', that are widespread among – often feminised, classed and racialised – temporary staff, who are responsabilised for their individual success via institutional metrics of academic performance.

Lundmark and colleagues demonstrate how ideas about practical and theoretical knowledge are negotiated in the academic career system, thus contributing to academic identities. The research results reveal a dissonance between the symbolic discourse about practice-based education, as explored in external communications on university websites and documents, and the academic career system in which theoretical knowledge is more highly



valued, as demonstrated in teachers' positions and assignments. According to the findings, the different attitudes towards theory and practice on the four organisational levels (the system level, the symbolic level, the interaction level and the performative level) send mixed messages that create tensions between theory and practice in the educational setting and a feeling of dissonance among employees. There is especially a dissonance between communicating a symbolic discourse to students about education being practical and forming their expectations, and the educational career system in which theoretical knowledge is more highly valued. An important contribution of the authors to the literature on precarity in academia is to show how broader arrangements of educational policies, external institutional communication and internal student and colleague expectations can be intertwined in their impact to induce negative sentiments around career experiences for female academics.

In the Central-Eastern European context, Tardos and Paksi identify three intertwining dimensions of precarity in academia: contractual precarity (short and fixed-term contracts), economic precarity (low level of wages) and gender-based discrimination. Precarity in relation to employment contracts is perceived as the most important hindering factor, followed by the phenomenon of low income, and finally cases of discrimination. According to the authors, employment on fixed-term contracts constitutes a permanent, institutionalised characteristic of an academic career in Hungary, closely linked to the project-based financing system and structural underfinancing of the sector. The research findings confirm that uncertainty stemming from precarious working conditions continues beyond the early career stage of teachers and researchers in Hungary, and fixed-term contracts, low wages and discrimination reproduce uncertainty at later career stages too, albeit differently. Tardos and Paksi identify four groups of impacts of precarity: career-, personal-, job- and organisation-related impacts, which are deeply intertwined. While career- and organisation-related impacts are present among both groups of junior and senior postdocs, job-related impacts (heavy workload and lack of time for research and self-development) seem to be manifested more among junior postdocs. On the personal level, childbearing-related impacts of precarity prove to be one of the strongest forms of impact, besides career-related ones. This involves care-led affective precarity (Ivancheva et al. 2019) and the phenomenon of postponed childbearing due to work-life imbalance (Paksi et al. 2022). Fixed-term contracts and low incomes (contractual and economic precarity) coupled



with structural and political precarity clearly had a powerful effect on major career decisions, while discrimination was often found to be an underlying cause and a reinforcing, contributing factor of precarity. The authors term this phenomenon of precarity intersecting with the careers of those with the highest level of education on the labour market the ‘precarity paradox’.

The second article coming from the Central-Eastern European region, written by Németh and colleagues, examines economic precarity and the gender pay gap among academics under the age of 45 in Hungary. An important finding is that the gender pay gap between young male and female Hungarian scholars has reached 12 per cent, which is almost the national average. Furthermore, deeply gendered academic pathways are highlighted, as parenthood affects men’s and women’s income differently; men experience a ‘fatherhood premium’ per child, but the income of women remains unaffected. Additionally, horizontal segregation appears to have a significant effect on income disparities as well. The gender ratio of a scientific field correlates strongly with obtainable income; specifically, in scientific fields with higher male ratios, average income is higher. Thus, the structural inequalities of masculinised and feminised fields amplify income disparities between male and female academics.

In the context of Colombia in South America, Castelao-Huerta focuses on precarious students and learning conditions and on how female professors take responsibility for the students’ advancement in their studies and early research careers to reduce the detrimental impact of underfinancing and lack of resources within the public higher education sector. The author has identified three main ‘rebusque’ behaviours performed by full-time female professors: (1) being available to perform services required by public or private entities in order to generate additional financial resources for students in return; (2) developing marketing strategies to obtain materials necessary to maintain the quality of teaching; and (3) cultivating relationships with colleagues on an international scale to gain access to other research centres through academic exchanges of their students, in many cases without extra expenses for the students. These ‘rebusque’ practices benefit precarious Colombian students and are innovative ways to counterbalance scarcity of resources in the higher education sector. However, the neoliberal approach to performance management has neglected the recognition of these time-consuming caring practices of female professors.



Implications for policy and practice

By examining the forms, processes and impacts of precarisation on the individual and organisational level in higher education and academia, the articles included here have identified implications for future policy and practice, and underline the urgent need for policymakers, governments and higher education institutions to take action. The retrospective inquiry into personal experiences of precarity by Morris and Rowell and the resulting ambivalent and multifaceted feeling of ‘belonging or not belonging’ highlight the detrimental impact on individuals’ well-being, meaningful knowledge creation, pedagogies and collegiality. Morris and Rowell emphasise the unsustainability of the neoliberal regime of academia and show that higher education institutions’ stated commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion are hollow unless they address the consequences of precarity among academics in the UK context.

Focusing on the institutional level, Tardos and Paksi, as well as Németh and colleagues, point out the role of newly introduced Gender Equality Plans in future structural change in higher education and research-performing organisations. Gender Equality Plans should include transparent data on fixed-term contracts and wage differentials by gender with the objective to assess gendered inequalities within organisations, and to advance relevant actions and measures to close the gaps. Since the Horizon Europe guidance on gender equality plans published by the European Commission does not reflect on ‘precarity’ (European Commission 2021), it is the authors’ suggestion that the European Union consider the inclusion of guidelines about precarity in the toolkits for Gender Equality Plans. Moreover, the Horizon Europe guidance only mentions ‘fixed-term contracts’ once in relation to work-life balance and parental leave policies, indicating that the length of fixed-term contracts should be extended in certain cases. Within this guidance, the gendered nature of precarious contracts is mentioned only in relation to the impacts of COVID-19, indicating the differential impacts on staff with fixed contract types, including that women might be over-represented in more precarious roles. The other widely used tool for Gender Equality Plans by research, development and innovation institutions is the Gender Equality in Academia and Research GEAR tool, but this does not refer to the problem of short-term contracts either (EIGE 2016, 2022). A multiplier effect could be achieved if these guiding EU documents included a focus on precarity and precarious contracts in the future.

Furthermore, as part of the gendered nature of precarious working conditions, meritocratic performance evaluation systems have been criticised for either not acknowledging or for undervaluing certain activities performed by academics. As an example of such an unvalued activity in the Colombian context, Castelao-Huerta analyses the processes of ‘rebusque’ undertaken by female professors to support precarious students’ advancement in their studies and early research careers and to reduce the detrimental impact of underfinancing and lack of resources. However, this type of extra work is not accounted for in performance evaluations. Another area where institutional decision-makers could revise present systems of performance evaluation is mentioned by Németh and colleagues and by Morris and Rowell, who point out that easy-to-measure indicators of scientific performance can lead to undervaluing teaching activities and other services for students, such as pastoral care, that are often gendered and invisible, leading to further gendered inequalities in career advancement. This contributes to the growing evidence of the dysfunctional effects of present performance management systems for academics.

On both societal and policy levels, maintaining the attractiveness of careers in research, especially for women, is of paramount importance. Governments need to increase the average wages of academics to levels that are sufficient to make a decent living from one main job so that they are not compelled to find secondary jobs and extra sources of income, as discussed by Tardos and Paksi and Németh and colleagues in the context of Hungary. Furthermore, governments and leaders of higher education institutions should assess the long-term detrimental effects of making individuals responsible for academic success without considering the structural barriers to career advancement that exist due to precarious working conditions and gender-based discrimination (often compounded through intersections with interrelated forms of discrimination). Moreover, it is of utmost significance that responsible decision-makers in higher education institutions and research organisations understand that precarity in academia can limit academic freedom, as Asli Vatansever and Aysuda Kölemen (2022) highlight in relation to the wider societal impacts of precarisation in the Global North.

The contributions shared here point to potentials for subversion and resistance to the current situation at individual, collective, institutional and policy levels. On an individual level, as highlighted by Castelao-Huerta, more established academics can play an important, creative role in nurturing colleagues in more precarious positions and contributing to better



conditions for their flourishing. However, this can come at a (gendered) cost if it is left to individual women academics to carry the responsibility for supporting students and early career colleagues and gaining access to the resources they need. This means that robust infrastructures to support education and research are essential. Morris and Rowell speak to ways in which precarious academics themselves might push back against casualisation and neoliberal academic cultures, through breaking the silences, expressing emotions, speaking out about inequities and poor contracts and working conditions, revaluing what is important to them, coming together in solidarity and finding spaces and possibilities for change. It is important to note that speaking out may be more possible for some colleagues than others, depending on relative privileges and positionalities. This work therefore also highlights the importance of mutual support, collective action and the solidarity that trade unions can provide as they fight to change the system. The articles here also signal a need for culture change towards rehumanising and revaluing caring, relational practices that all too often are feminised and thus invisibilised. Research in this field can be said to be resistant, through naming and exposing the structural and cultural inequalities at play so that they can be critiqued and challenged, as Lundmark and colleagues do in relation to institutions and Németh and colleagues do at a national level. Tardos and Paksi, alongside Németh and colleagues, contribute steps that could be taken at a policy level to make links between gender inequality and precarity explicit so they can be prioritised. What is clear from these articles and the wider body of work that this Special Issue builds on is the negative impact precarity is having on academics and academic cultures, on learning, teaching and research, and ultimately on gender and interrelated equity goals. The conditions of survival outlined here will inevitably undermine the quality of learning, teaching and student experiences alongside constraining opportunities to undertake research, engage in meaningful knowledge creation and pursue academic careers, leaving an uncertain legacy for academic workers of the future; in short, this situation is unsustainable. It is therefore imperative that such working, living and learning conditions are resisted and addressed.

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