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Tomorrow's a Mystery: Constructions of the Future and 'un/becoming' amongst 'early' and 'late' career academics

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Abstract (148 words)

Constructing a secure sense of a professional future has become increasingly difficult for early career researchers (see Rothengatter & Hil, 2013), whilst concerns about present and future job in/security have also been expressed in relation to already-established academics (Leathwood & Read, 2013). In this paper we draw on qualitative data from a UK study to explore everyday conceptualisations of the future for both 'early career' and 'late career' academics, in the context of increased fears and actualities of occupational precarity. We utilize theories of the social construction of time, as well as a conception of precarity and 'precarization' utilised by Butler (2009a, 2009b) and Lorey (2015), relating to 'politically induced' forms of insecurity that are a direct product of neoliberalism. The research reveals a variety of forms and levels of concern and anxiety by both groups for their own futures, and for the future of the academy as a whole.

Keywords: academics, early career, precarity, casualization, neoliberalism

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have greatly improved the paper.

In this article, we discuss the perceptions and experiences of UK academics who are either towards the beginning or the end of their careers in academia, focusing in particular on their constructions of their present and future in HE, and the future of academia as a whole. As we shall see, these perceptions and experiences relate to wider, pervasive policy and cultural trends in academia internationally. We consider how the present circumstances of our participants affect their constructions of their future in HE and of the future of academia as a whole, utilising the insights of authors such as Adam (1990, 2007) and Araujo (2005) on the social construction of time. We are also drawing on a conception of precarity and 'precarization' utilised by Butler (2009a, 2009b) and developed by Lorey (2015), relating to 'politically induced' forms of insecurity that are a direct product of neoliberalism. As we discuss, there is a temporal dimension to the ways in which such dynamics infuse everyday life, in the form of ongoing constructions and interpretations of the past and the future from the point of the present – and it is this temporal-spatial dynamic to precarity and precarization we explore in this paper.

Precarity, Precarization and Higher Education

The concept of precarity is now firmly established in the social sciences, particularly in relation to the dynamics of 'post-Fordist' (primarily global North) economies, which have seen a decline in 'traditional' manufacturing industries and the norm or promise (for some) of a stable job for life, towards knowledge and service sector industries that are increasingly shifting to more insecure and temporary forms of employment (Millar, 2017). Standing (2011, 2014) has argued that this has resulted in the rise of a new 'precariat' class, although this notion is contested. In addition to the

focus on the labour market, a much broader conception of precarity has developed, notably following the work of Butler (2004, 2009a, 2009b); see also Ettlinger, 2007; Lorey, 2011; Millar 2017). This includes not just the effects (and affects) of material conditions of precarity, but also more 'existential' and 'ontological' fears concerning insecurity in relation to one's existence and the nature of 'being' (or indeed 'becoming' something else). Butler in particular focuses on the ways in which such fears can manifest in conservative reactions to 'protect' the status quo from destabilising 'others' (notably in relation to current anti-immigration rhetoric and Islamophobia).

In this article we have found this broader conceptualisation especially useful, and in particular the ways in which different facets of these dynamics in Butler's work have been highlighted, distinguished and developed by Lorey (2015). Lorey makes a distinction between 'precariousness' – a general state and feelings of vulnerability shared by all living beings; 'precarity' – a category of order, relating to the unequal distribution of insecurities and precariousness; and finally 'governmental precarisation' – the political inducement and exacerbation of these dynamics through capitalism and especially through neoliberalist forms of governance. For Lorey,

> Precarization is not an exception, it is rather the rule. [….] Precarization means more than insecure jobs […] By way of insecurity and danger it embraces the whole of existence, the body, modes of subjectivation. It is threat and coercion, even while it opens up new possibilities of living and working (2015, p.1).

In this same passage Lorey notes that precarization is increasing in areas of life and work usually considered to be 'secure', and this is certainly the case in academia. As

we shall go on to discuss, the dynamics of precarization, both material and existential, are pervasive in the sector. Materially they are evident in dynamics such as the impact of reductions in funding on staff working conditions, as well as the financial difficulties that accrue from the increased prevalence of casualised forms of labour. As Gupta, Habjan and Tutek (2016) note, there has been a notable increase in the 'casualization' of labour within academia in the last two decades. For example in the UK, Metcalf (2005) reported an increase an increase in short-term and hourly-paid contracts and the loss of tenure for academic staff over the previous ten to twenty years, and more recently an analysis of national data for 2013-14 by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU, 2016, p. 4) concludes that 'at least 54% of all academic staff and 49% of academics teaching in our universities are on an insecure contract'.

Concerns in relation to material aspects of precarity cannot be completely separated from broader, more 'existential' or 'ontological' anxieties relating to the stability, and legitimacy of one's self-narrative and trajectory (Grey, 1994). As Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and others discuss, the workplace can be a key arena for the construction of (fragile and contingent) 'projects of self', where "people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (p. 626; see also Clarke et al., 2009). In academia this relates not only to the more pervasive anxieties and pressures generated by an intensified, competitive and highly performative culture, which can impact on an individual's sense of self-confidence as an 'academic' and the legitimacy of one's professional identity, but also more chronic, on-going worries over the (largely unexplicit) consequences of failing to 'make the grade' set by one's institution (Leathwood and Read, 2013).

As we have discussed above, a key aspect of Butler (2009) and Lorey (2015)'s conceptualisation of precarity is the unequal experience of its effects by different social groups according to wider differential patterns of inequality and dis/advantage. This is borne out in both the more 'material' and 'existential' aspects of precarity in academia. Academic culture has never engendered a sense of security for all: indeed throughout its history it has been shown to be extremely hierarchical and inegalitarian. As Harris (2005) notes, the university 'was and remains a site of exclusion, elitism and power' (p. 424). It is an arena where many are or become marginalized from the security of the 'centre', often reflecting/reinforcing wider social inequalities such as those based on gender, social class background, and 'race'/ethnicity (see. e.g. Mirza, 1995; Reay, 2004; Leathwood and Read, 2009).

Such pre-existing patterns of social inequality are intensified by the dynamics of precarization. For example, in relation to the casualization of academic posts, the UK's Equality Challenge Unit (2016) analysis found that women, under-35s, disabled and black and minority ethnic academics are more likely to be on temporary and/or 'teaching-only' contracts.

Whilst the effects of precarization are felt by many across the board in academia (in both material and/or existential ways), those in more advantaged groups are not only less likely to experience precarity (especially the material aspects of precarity), they are also likely to be more able to draw on forms of economic, social and cultural capital in order to mitigate or protect against the effects of precarity (Butler, 2009). Moreover, as we shall go on to discuss, the effects of precarization have a strong *temporal* element that is also differentially, and complexly, constituted and experienced.

The Temporality of Precarization, and Constructions of the Future in HE

In order to explore the temporality of precarization we will be combining the insights of Butler and Lorey with the work of Adam (1990, 2007) and others on the social construction of time, in particular the ways in which people construct conceptions of the future in the present day. Adam discusses the ways in which such constructions are perpetual but often go unnoticed:

> Forecasting the future is something we [….] do on a daily basis. All of us are prophets, predictors, prospectors and planners of the future when we negotiate traffic, keep appointments, honour obligations and commitments.…All these projections and plans imply knowledge before the event and depend on a substantial stock of experience and tacit know-how. In our daily lives we move in and out of such different futures without giving much thought to the matter, treating many aspects of the 'not yet' as known, rarely attending to what it is we do in such situations and how we go about doing it (2007, p. 12).

Scholars have aimed to theorise this elision of the future-in-the-present in different ways. Mead (1932) was one of the first sociologists to talk of the subjectivity of time, constructed as it is in the 'specious present', a moment made up of horizons of the past and the future from where we interpret or imagine what has come before and what will arise. Giddens (1991) and others have argued that such constructions are increasingly fluid and changeable in late modernity, based on an individual's continual reflection on the potential risks and benefits of decisions and how their choices may influence their future. One important social factor that affects the ability of a person to make plans for the future is a sense of security and stability in the

present (Bourdieu, 2000).

For Lorey (2015), fear of the future is both an effect of, and constitutive of, neoliberal forms of governance:

> Precarization means living with the unforeseeable, with contingency. In the secularized modernity of the West, however, being exposed to contingency is generally regarded as a nightmare, as a loss of all security, all orientation, all order […] Fear of what is not calculable marks the techniques of governing and subjectivation, merging into an inordinate culture of measuring the unmeasurable (2015, p1-2).

In Higher Education we can see the effects of the need for HEIs to secure their own *institutional* future (in terms of government or private funding, the capital of status and prestige, the ability to attract future students) through seeking to quantify and measure the research and teaching performance of staff in terms of measurable indicators (and to predict what these may be in the future).

These insecurities are paralleled for individual academics in their concerns to secure their personal futures, by for example gaining a research grant, publications to better secure one's future academic identity or a new contract (for those in insecure positions). Anticipations of future consequences of actions and decisions in the present can have a strong self-regulatory effect: for example academics in temporary positions are likely to feel less able to speak out or criticize their employers or institution for fear of their employment being curtailed or not renewed (see Grove, 2014).

Self-regulation motivated by future-anxiety can arguably be seen throughout HE in terms of a pervasive cultural insecurity and fear of the 'not yet' (Adam, 2007) that includes both those on casualised contracts, but also spreads more widely to those holding 'permanent' contracts. As we have reported elsewhere (Leathwood & Read, 2013) our study of the impact of HE policy on academics' research experiences and perceptions showed that even those with permanent 'research and teaching' contracts wrestled with anxieties relating to the security of their positions, through not being able to meet the quantified targets for performance set by their institutions.

We will be drawing on data from this study, as well as extra material specifically gathered for this article, to explore the dynamics of precarization (Lorey 2015) as a pervasive force that can relate to more chronic existential anxieties of *future* loss of security and 'belonging' in academia from those arguably sitting in the security of the 'centre', as well as the effects of forms of material and 'existential' precarity related to more 'marginal' locations in the academy in the present. We will be exploring the perceptions and experiences of two groups: those in the early stages of a university career, and also those who are in the process of or considering leaving. We will be exploring how precarization is conceptualized and experienced at the micro level (see Ettlinger, 2007) for these groups, and how it affects an academic's conception of their own present and future in HE and/or the future of academia as a whole.

Methodology

As mentioned above, this paper draws on data from a qualitative study of the effects of trends in HE policy on academics' work and experience, funded by the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE), and collected in two stages in 2011-12 and

2014. For the first stage, academics who specialise in research on higher education were invited to participate through emails circulated to relevant academic networks, and a total of 73 interviews took place over email. Email interviews have been successfully utilized in social science research (see e.g. Burns, 2010) and allow for participants to respond to questions at their own time and pace, and with the ability to edit their written answers before sending to the researcher. Although there is not the degree of immediacy that exists in face-to-face semi-structured interviews, the researcher can still follow up 'after the fact', with supplementary questions and requests for clarification, an approach we adopted. After initial correspondence establishing informed consent, we sent an email containing a short number of research questions and elicited contextual data such as occupational status, age range, and self-identification in terms of gender, social class and ethnicity. We then followed up with a final email as necessary with any clarification or expansion questions (for details of the methodology and sample, see Leathwood & Read, 2013).

In 2014 we re-contacted our participants to ask them about developments since our last email interview session, and to ask new questions designed specifically to explore issues related to precarity in the academy. 28 participants responded (15 women and 13 men). We were conscious that our original 2011 study contained a disproportionate number of academics in 'established' permanent positions, and through a 'snowballing' technique we were able to include three extra participants in casualised positions (further details of participants below).

For this paper we wanted to explore perceptions of the future for participants in two contrasting positions – those who are relatively new to academia and those who could be characterised as 'late career' academics, considering retirement and/or in the process of phasing down from full-time to part-time work. Some are on temporary

and or part-time contracts, and some currently have permanent positions. Although more attention has been placed on precarity and the impact of casualization in relation to early career academics, there is also a degree of casualised working practices and/or existential insecurity amongst 'late career' academics, who may also be in a somewhat liminal, transitional state – of 'unbecoming', rather than looking to 'become', an academic (Colley, James & Diment, 2007). This paper focuses then on 16 participants, who could be argued to fall into these categories. This includes 7 participants (4 from our 2011 study and 3 recruited in 2014) who are relatively new to academia and/or in insecure or temporary positions (Agatha, Faye, Jenna, Mary, Paula, Pippa, Sandy). The remaining 9 were academics (all recruited in 2011) who were seriously considering, or were in the process of, leaving or retiring (Daniel, Denise, Gary, Judith, Nigel, Owen, Sara) or reducing their hours from a previously held 'established' position (David, Emilia). For the purposes of this study we have used the terms 'early career' and 'late career', though with the recognition that the notion of 'career' is problematic, suggesting a linear development pathway that is far removed from the messy realities of many academic careers (in particular for many women), and is likely to become more so with the rise of casualised employment. In addition, as will be seen, 'early career' does not necessarily mean of young age or, indeed, of the most junior academic posts.

[Tables 1 and 2 to be inserted here]

As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, our first group of 7 academics, the majority on fixed term or hourly paid contracts, were predominantly women and attached to pre-92 institutions. Mirroring the sample of the wider study, the majority identified as White British. The second group of 9 academics were in the majority on permanent or open-ended contracts. The group comprised four women and five men, from a mix of

pre- and post-92 universities. The age range of this second group is narrower, with 3 of the participants in their fifties and 6 aged 61 or over. A thematic analysis was applied to the data utilising the qualitative software package NVivo. Themes identified included: conceptualisation of the academic and academic identities; becoming/unbecoming; spatial relations – centre/margin; insecurities/precariousness – material and existential; inequalities/precarity; time: past/present/future; and movement/fixity. For this article our concern was to focus particularly on the relationships between precarity and time (presentism/the future), to explore the ways in which material conditions and existential identities intersect and play out for these two differently positioned/located groups of academics.

Given our own locations, past/present experience and identity as academics, it was crucial that we maintained a continual level of reflexivity as to how these identifications and experiences would influence our interpretations of the data – helped by working collaboratively in the analysis and cross-checking our individual interpretations. In line with our epistemological stance of critical interpretivism, we would argue that such procedures are the most effective way of ensuring validity and reliability of data, in contrast to 'traditional' positivist and postpositivist conceptions of validity and reliability that are most often applied to quantitative data (Cresswell & Miller, 2000).

The present and future for 'Early Career' Participants: Attempting to 'become' an academic

In discussing what it means to be an 'academic', Henkel (2005) notes the temporality of such an identification: a person's conception of their 'academic self' is constructed and re-constructed fluidly at different points in time and in different contexts, and may be influenced by past and present imaginings and desires of what an 'academic' might or could be – and of what such a position could mean in the future. As Deem (1998), Harris (2005) Gale (2011) and others have noted, whilst academia has been solidly moving towards a 'business' rather than 'collegium' model, academics' own identities have not shifted to the same degree, even if such identification is based on a dream of what the job *should* or *could* be like rather than based on lived experience. Of course, the 'collegium' model of the autonomous, intellectual scholar is a subject position historically the preserve of (white, privileged) men – and the coding of 'the intellectual' as masculine remains pervasive (Leathwood, 2013). Nevertheless, many academics still place high value and emotional investment in the conception of a university as a site for a liberal education, where academics are encouraged to think, reflect and pursue ideas, and conduct research that may have no immediate utilitarian value.

Archer's (2008) study of early career academics found this was just as true for those at the beginning of their university careers as for 'established' academics. Nevertheless, the ECAs in our study were clear in perceiving the business discourse as infusing what *universities* as employers defined as valued 'academic' work. It is not surprising that university recruitment requirements were the key concern for these participants in conceptualising the possibilities of a stable future in academia. One of the participants in our 'early' sample, Paula, was working intensely for an imminent book deadline, with corresponding high levels of anxiety and stress. However, she hoped that the pressure would ease in the future: "I know this won't be forever and I

am hoping life will be a bit easier when the book is completed".

We can see a link here with Berlant's (2011) discussion of 'cruel optimism' within late capitalism – where an object of desire – less an object than a "cluster of promises" – holds in one hand the promise of prosperity or 'flourishing' for those who can attain it, and simultaneously impedes or blocks the individual's ability to do so. In HE, the 'promise' of a secure future in HE is impeded by the demands of producing quantifiable 'outputs' with little or no support in which to fulfil these requirements.

Some in the 'early' sample discussed such difficulties in ways where the 'material' problems of present precarization and 'existential' concerns for the future are interlinked. For example Pippa, following work as an hourly paid lecturer, and had finally gained a temporary 0.8 fractional post, notes:

> A part-time hourly paid worker is like a temp. She only gets paid for the actual hours worked and so christmas, easter and summer are unpaid. There is no time to write or publish because she has to try to find work during these unpaid months. This ends up being almost half of the year when you add it all up. Such stress and anxiety also means that you can not do your job very well. In my first year as a teacher I had insomnia and panic attacks. (Pippa, SL, post-92 sector)

In conceptualising the future, practical, material concerns were at the fore for some. For example, Mary states:

> The temporary contracts issue has been a very real problem for me. Until

August 2014 I was on very short-term contracts which of course was very

difficult for knowing things like whether I would be able to pay my rent

the next month, or getting a proper holiday when your holiday is given in

very small chunks and you need to use it up before the end of the contract

[. . .] I am now very lucky to have two years security, which compared to

lots of my friends / people who graduated at the same time as me working

inside and outside of academia is practically permanent.

(Mary, Research Assistant, pre-92 sector)

That a two-year contract is now seen as 'practically permanent' is indicative of how precarious academic labour has become. Paradoxically in relation to their hopes and concerns for the future, there is a sense of 'forced presentism' with the precarization of short-term and hourly paid work: found similarly by Ylijoki in her study of casualised Finnish academics (2010; see also Clegg, 2010). Leccardi (2005) has coined the term 'presentification', identified as a reduction of ability to plan for the future in any confident sense, with such imaginings of the future reconfigured as daydreaming/'wishful' thinking and beyond the realm of believable possibility. Being 'stuck' in the present has a plethora of knock-on effects. For example, Mary identified participant recruitment difficulties due to the lack of certainty regarding the continuation of the project she is contracted to work on, and Jenna talked about the difficulties of building networks or a coherent research specialism when working on piecemeal projects (difficulties also expressed by younger participants in Skelton's 2004 study).

Developing and finding a space for such a specialism - seen as essential to becoming a 'real academic' - was a keenly expressed desire for a number of participants, a

desired future infusing their decisions in the present, as well as the emotional toll of anxiety as to whether this can be achieved. For example Faye states:

> In part the dilemma is balancing priorities. As a 'contract' researcher once one project finishes (and often before) you have moved to another project and the 'headspace' to write from the former project is less easy to find…[Due to working in a variety of different areas] I feel a confident and experienced researcher but my ability to see myself as a 'specialist' in one specific area is much harder. It is that degree of specialism that leads to really high quality publication.

> (Faye, RF, pre-92 sector)

The notion of the specialist 'expert' academic is entwined with 'traditional' collegium notions of the academic, including the ability to specialise in research 'for its own sake' rather than for instrumental or strategic ends. However, for our participants in the 'early' sample such desires were often expressed (and possibly at some points conflated with) the desire to produce outputs that would 'count' in terms of metrics such as the UK's research audit, the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Moreover, there can be a tendency to 'individualise' one's failure to achieve the demands of 'REF-ability'. Although Faye notes the structural constraints on her potential future success due to the temporary nature of her position – and elsewhere notes a lack of departmental support – she also pinpoints a causal factor in her own individual ability to 'balance priorities'. As Billot (2010) notes, academics have a certain degree of agency to "negotiate their roles and responsibilities through the process of prioritising" (p. 713), hence the tendency to blame oneself. However, in practice academics will have differential ability to successfully 'juggle' work in this

way, for example in relation to the 'experience' capital they can draw on and their knowledge of the unwritten 'rules of the game' of academic cultures (Calvert, Lewis & Spindler, 2011). In addition, are the degrees of confidence an ECA may feel to be able to challenge the competing demands of others – a confidence that has been noted in the literature to be both socially constituted and markedly classed, 'raced' and gendered (see Leathwood & Read, 2009). Faye had been working in contract research for some time before completing her PhD and saw herself as a "hybrid old and new researcher" as a consequence. Envisaging having 10 years before retirement, Faye was concerned to be able to 'use' this time "wisely and effectively", yet a profound sense of uncertainty made future direction and success unclear: 'I am not sure if I have a future in academic research and I cannot see a clear career trajectory for myself".

Finally, for many ECAs – especially those on insecure or teaching-only contracts – the effects of temporal insecurity are felt in relation to the need to work towards the required outputs in time not 'paid for' by the university. For example, Sarah, a late career academic, discussing her advice to one of her PhD students, says:

> We have concluded that she would be best to take a part time post somewhere and then work the other half doing the publications that will be used to assess her achievements. The university is most unlikely to give her the time to write the very publications they use to assess her.
>
> (Sarah, Reader, pre-92 sector)

There will of course be differential capacities to work over and above contracted hours and/or being able to reduce paid work hours (for example differential ability to draw on financial/ domestic support) – that are more likely to disadvantage women

and those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This is also the case for many academics on 'permanent' research and teaching contracts who also feel pressures to publish that require time over and above their contracted hours. As Fleming (2014) argues, this 'dissolving' of the boundaries between 'work' and 'non-work' – in terms of demarcated hours and in terms of financial remuneration for one's efforts – is characteristic of neoliberal work cultures. Utilising Foucault's (1998) conceptualisation of biopower, he notes the ways in which organisations increasingly encroach on and capitalise from the 'value' of the life of the worker, over and above formal contracted arrangements.

There is a strong element of self-regulation in such dynamics, where these encroachments are constructed (by organisations and sometimes also by the individual themselves) as the product of individual agentic choices. Osbaldiston, Cannizzo and Mauri (2016), drawing on work of writers such as Noonan (2015) have discussed a distinction made by many academics between 'instrumental' and 'substantive' labour. They argue that Early Career Academics in their study were on the whole happy to conduct 'substantive' research work in their own time (as found in Archer's 2008 study). They found this was partly due to a sense of 'joy' or 'passion' such work engendered. However, relevant to our discussion here on existential questions, another 'cluster' of motivations were explicitly temporal in inflection, for example the relationship of such work to their sense of self in relation to academia as a whole, and their hope or belief that such work will help them realise their future professional ambitions.

The optimism expressed by Paula above that life might get easier once her book is published was not shared by others in the sample, especially those on casualised contracts and/or those not able (or willing) to labour on an unpaid basis. For example,

Pippa talks explicitly about the 'trap' ECAs fall into, where their precarity becomes cemented:

> It seems that a new semi-permanent tier of the labour market has become almost solidified and that this is the fractional, flexible worker. The fractional worker gets reproduced as precarious because her conditions are such that she has no time or opportunity to publish.

She goes on to note the particular problem for women ECAs who would like to plan for children:

> I am 36 years old and I want to have a family one day soon. But I also think that it may be impossible, or at least will mean putting my career in severe risk. Without a permanent post you have no maternity leave and no job guaranteed for when you have had your child. This is utterly terrifying to me, not only for financial reasons but because I am terrified of simply being left with no options. Having spoken to many women in my situation it is clear that most of them decided not to have a family because it was just simply not feasible, rather than deciding they didn't want to. Either that, or women just quit. If your conditions are already completely precarious and you feel undervalued then quitting to have a family makes sense. If your wage is uncertain and your partner's is not, the choice is simple.
>
> (Pippa, SL, post-92 sector)

In a variety of ways, then, the (mainly women) 'early career' academics in our sample expressed a sense of uncertainty and insecurity in their attempts to become established

academics and their sense of a future in academia. This often related to directly material aspects such as permanence of contract, vacation allowance and maternity benefit – an example of the gendered, embodied insecurity of those who do not 'fit' the normative conception of the academic as independent of caring responsibilities (Leathwood & Read, 2009). Other less directly tangible but nevertheless strongly felt issues, such as a perceived lack of value and support by their institution, as well as a sense of marginalisation, also contributed to more 'existential' feelings of insecurity in the present and anxieties about the future for the majority of these participants.

'Late Career' Academics, and the Future of Academia

Our 'late career' sample of academics were either on more secure academic contracts or had retired, and did not talk about material forms of precarity in relation to themselves - despite changes to the security of the sector's main occupational pension scheme initiated in 2014 – and at the time of writing under even more severe threat (see Cumbo, 2017). Much of their concern was in relation to others in the academy, including colleagues and their fears, and the future of higher education per se.

Looking with concern at the requirements for gaining a secure position in the current context, a number of 'late career' participants explicitly stated that they themselves would not have been able to establish themselves in academia today with the level of expectations now required. Noting the relative privilege of a permanent position, some also stressed the pleasures of research, teaching and doctoral supervision, and a continued relative level of autonomy in the role. However, as we have discussed elsewhere (Leathwood & Read, 2013) we found high levels of disillusionment with requirements of the professional position of the academic across our wider overall

study that were seen to be governed through recourse to 'business'/managerial discourse – for example the valuing placed on certain forms of research rather than others, on the priority given to bids for external funding and for certain amounts/types of publications for the REF. A number of participants spoke of their own or others' anxieties for the future, often expressed as a fear of failing to 'make the grade'. Such fears were more often expressed by those working in pre-92 universities where research was emphasised more strongly as an expectation of the academic role (see Gale, 2011), but was by no means limited to participants in these institutions. Moreover, one concern that was repeatedly discussed by established academics was the perceived 'threat' of being moved to a 'teaching-only contract' – a form of employment that Gale (ibid.) notes denoted 1 in 4 academic positions in the UK at the time of her research. Moving to such a contract was perceived as one way of falling away from 'real' academia, and a move away from a position of security.

Emilia discussed her concerns for other academics and said:

> I have the impression that only those with an established research profile can hope for a permanent post now and that this is inexorably leading to a teaching/research division of posts; the latter have primacy despite all the rhetoric about teaching qualifications being required for H.E.
>
> (Emilia, a semi-retired professor, post-92 sector)

Like Colley et al.'s (2007) study of 'unbecoming' in FE, there was also some discussion amongst the 'late' group around reducing hours and/or leaving the profession as a result of the pressures of performativity. In an echo of Jenna's discussion of conducting research in her spare time, many established academics in our overall study discussed how heavy teaching and administrative loads meant that

research was increasingly shifted to evenings and weekends, a pressure that was felt to be ultimately untenable. And we find in our 'late career' sample a number of participants discussing either retirement or a voluntary move towards a teaching-only contract, not as a complete break from academia, but specifically in order to pursue their own research without constraints.

Such future-plans to move away from the 'centre' amongst this group were thus couched more as plans or desires to 'escape' from 'instrumental' as opposed to 'substantive' forms of labour, and the encroachment of institutional performative demands on all aspects of their lives. Like the 'early' sample, conceptions of the future for this group related to desires and hopes in relation to pursuing the 'substantive' aspects of academic labour. However a crucial difference between our 'early' and 'late' groups was that the latter group had seemingly acquired – or hoped to acquire – sufficient material security to be able to plan for such a future transition away from the 'centre'.

Moreover, having already 'established' a degree of status in the academy – and seeking to escape the pressures to produce work to fulfil 'performance indicators'- they were not motivated by existential concerns around establishing and maintaining an academic career. Nevertheless, the continuing desire to conduct 'substantive' academic labour indicated a strong desire to leave precisely in order to protect their sense of academic identity and engagement with the 'academic project'. Indications of 'presentification' or being stuck in a 'forced present' that emerged with our 'early' group did not emerge as a theme with the late group, connected to the lack of material precarity for this latter group, and the lack of 'existential' concerns about the inability to progress with one's academic vocation.

'Existential' concerns for this group thus related more to the ethical legitimacy of their continuation in paid or unpaid positions in academia, and the implications for those trying to enter the profession. Some spoke of continued unpaid emeritus work or continuation in casualised contracts – but expressed concerns that they may be 'taking up space' that could otherwise be occupied by those at the beginning of their careers. Gary for example states:

> I have retired and have become an emeritus member of my department. I suppose that this has involved a degree of casualisation, in that I now carry out a small number of tasks but without remuneration - indeed, they cost me a few quid in travel to the university. This includes a couple of hours first year lecturing and supervising two doctorates. I love doing this, but it seems to me to have two implications. First, am I doing work for free that could otherwise help give someone else a toehold on the career ladder? Second, how much unpaid labour are emeriti contributing, and has it risen in recent years?
>
> (Gary, Emeritus Professor, pre-1992 sector)

Owen also raised a concern that if he continued in his post beyond 65 he may 'block' the career development of early career academics. The relative lack of research/ attention to issues of late career academics in relation to these issues is reflected in Emilia's question below:

> One thought did occur to me - how precarious is it for OLD members of staff? Now the statutory retirement age has been removed, it is technically possible for us to remain in post as long as we want - so what is happening in the older age groups - is anyone being pressurised to leave?

Of course, the removal of the statutory retirement age could be said to *reduce* precarity for those in Emilia's position, and increase opportunities for phased retirement alongside a reduced workload. As stated above, no-one in this group spoke explicitly about pension arrangements, but most were still or had been in relatively senior established posts, and so presumably able to rely on at least some years of a final-salary occupational pension.

Whilst none of our sample reported any pressure towards them directly, a debate has begun to emerge in a number of national contexts over the consequences for the sector of an 'aging' workforce who "won't retire" (Yaffe, 2016, online, see also, e.g. Anonymous, 2014; Feldman, 2015). Some commentators have explicitly labelled academics who continue to work full-time past retirement age as 'greedy' and 'selfish' (see Fendrich, 2014 and critique by Schuman, 2014). Highlighting the emotions involved in what can be seen simplistically as a 'generational divide', this discourse can problematically lead to the individualising of 'blame' onto the choices of individuals rather than making a more sustained critique of the influence of wider forces at play, such as the pervasive sectoral influence of neoliberalist discourses disguised as 'tough but necessary' policy in austere times (Mercille & Murphy, 2015).

Whilst not attributing blame to individuals in this way, concerns were also expressed by members of our 'early' sample as to the effects of such practices for academia as a whole. For example Faye pondered: 'What I cannot see is how the 'next generation' is being grown in this climate'. Whilst some casualised academics in the early sample struggled with feelings of being stuck

in a 'forced present', it could be argued that in some respects academia as a sector is also lacking the ability to clearly foresee the consequences for present practices on the sector's future prosperity – summed up in a memorable opinion piece headline, 'Academia has to stop eating its young' (Yazdanian, 2015). But it is not only the young who are at risk in these neoliberal times. One UK university that announced axing 140 academic posts has been accused of planning to get rid of senior (more expensive) academics to replace them with cheaper, junior teaching staff (Perraudin and Pidd, 2017), raising concerns about job security for more established academics.

Conclusions

We have attempted to explore the variety of ways in which both 'early career' academics and, less expansively, 'late career' academics, perceive their futures in the profession in the current policy climate, and how experiences and fears of precarity influence and constrain perceptions of the future. As we have discussed, there are gendered, classed and 'raced' patterns in relation to those holding 'secure' permanent academic positions in the UK and elsewhere, although such patterns are not new: securing a relatively 'safe' permanent position has always been difficult for some (Leathwood & Read, 2009). However, the casualisation of academic posts is impacting particularly on early career academics' attempts to enter the profession, with particular impacts on women and those less socio-economically affluent who are less able to 'ride the wave' of precarity in the sector.

As we have discussed in this paper, the processes of precarization in the sector have complex implications for academic staff that differ for those on insecure/secure

contracts, and for those at different points and relationships to normative conceptions of career 'stage' and progression in the academy. Academics we have tentatively categorised as 'early career' (acknowledging the problematics of such categorisations) articulated concerns and anxieties that related to both material and existential facets of precarity, induced by neoliberalist strategies of increased reliance on casualised contracts, and/or the increased pressures of achieving ever higher performance targets in terms of grant funding and publications. These experiences of precarity for our early sample were linked to particular temporal dynamics, such as a sense of 'forced presentism' and inability to plan for the future, and the dissolving of paid 'work' and non-work time boundaries.

For some in the 'late' group, similar temporal experiences of the encroachment of institutional work demands into all aspects of lived life led them to consider moving away from the 'secure centre' of academia, at least in terms of holding full-time permanent positions. For this group, most of whom were on permanent contracts or retired, the personal effects of precarization were not articulated in relation to material insecurity, or in relation to 'existential' insecurities around progression – and consequently did not articulate the sense of being 'stuck' in the present that emerged in the early sample. Their personal experience of precarization can be seen in concerns around their own legitimacy in continuing to conduct institutional work past the traditional retirement age, or in the desire to 'escape' the performativity required by their institutions: demands that are driven by institutions' own need to guard against the threat of future material insecurity in terms of governmental funding and the income from student fees. In terms of temporality, their desires for the future are distinctly different from the 'early' sample – for example in the desire to move away from, rather than towards, institutional demands for 'instrumental' labour that will

encroach on or subsume swathes of 'personal' time.

For both the 'early' and particularly the 'late' group, concerns around precarization were also expressed in relation to the uncertainty of the future for the academy itself. At the time of writing, current socio-political events, such as in Europe the effects of 'Brexit', compound such feelings of uncertainty for the future. Our study was conducted before the Brexit referendum, but subsequent events have clearly raised questions about the futures of European academics working and living in the UK, and the future of the HE sector as a whole.

Taking Butler's definition of precarity as 'precariousness that is politically induced', it is essential to understand the contemporary landscape of academia in relation to the power of institutionally-legitimised discourses to both constrain academic work and practices but also work 'in the life of the mind' – influencing our notions of what a successful academic should 'be' and what they should 'achieve', and infusing our conceptualisations of our 'success' and 'failure' even as we try to distance ourselves from such 'regimes of truth'. However, some hope is engendered by the range of passionate, sustained and imaginative protests against increased casualization in the sector internationally (see e.g. Universities and Colleges Union, 2015; Fighting Against Casualisation in Education, 2016; Yazdanian, 2015), including for example a picnic honouring 'St Precaria' by members of University of California's Santa Cruz campus (University Council American Federation of Teachers, 2015). Such activities and events are joined by wider protests by students and staff against aspects of 'marketised' academic culture more broadly such as the closure of 'unprofitable courses' and the cost of tuition (e.g. Jack, 2010; Jones, 2014), as well as more long-established forms of academic elitism and marginalisation (e.g. Hartocollis & Bidgood, 2015). The range of such protests highlight the scale of the issues protestors

are up against, and the urgency for academics engaged in research on social justice to continue to focus their gaze *within,* as well as outside of, the academy, in order to be able to work towards a prosperous – and socially just – future for the sector.

Notes

1) In the UK, the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act gave university status to 35 institutions previously designated as polytechnics. The term 'pre-92' and 'post-92' refers to higher education institutions that held university status before and after this Act, respectively.

2) In UK institutions the position of Lecturer (and Senior Lecturer in some post-92 institutions) is roughly equivalent to Assistant Professor in the US and Canada, and to the Lecturer rank in Australia). In the UK the position of Senior Lecturer (in pre-92 institutions and some post-92 institutions) and Reader is roughly equivalent to Associate Professor in the US, Canada, and Australia.

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