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## Seeking Compassion in the Measured University: Generosity, Collegiality and Competition in Academic Practice

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### ABSTRACT

In the context of league tables, national student surveys and increasing competition for students and resources, measurement and comparison is an ever-present – and ever more significant – aspect of contemporary academic life. Institutional definitions of prestige and success intertwine with individuals' sense of value, career-progression and everyday work activity in varying ways, from active championing of particular dominant visions of 'excellence' through to varying forms of resistance, both passive and active. Faced with such challenges, increasing attention is being given to where academics find support, value and motivation in their working lives. This paper explores academics' narratives of the relationship and practices that shape their career decisions and frame their academic practice, highlighting the everyday pressures that squeeze space for compassionate collegiality.

The paper draws on narrative interviews that explored how academics experienced kindness and collegiality as they transition through their careers, examining detailed personal narratives of 23 academics based at Scottish universities. Participants shared their CVs and three artefacts (pictures, objects, or events) that were significant to their career journey. The resulting narratives offer detailed insight into how participants negotiate institutional pressures and frame relations with colleagues in order to create meaning, value and (degrees of) 'happiness' in their work.

The paper argues that while there is recognition of the impact of universities' strive for 'excellence' on staff interactions and work priorities, this is largely de-politicised in institutional contexts, with attention given to personal resilience, finding work-life balance, and individuals developing soft-skills to manage everyday interactions. The more socially-oriented concept of 'compassion' offers a fresh perspective from which to explore the everyday interactions within the university and consider the practical and political steps required to create supportive work environments.

**Keywords:** academic practice, collegiality, excellence, resistance, compassion

### 1. Introduction

In the context of league tables, national student surveys and increasing competition for students and resources, measurement and comparison is an ever-present – and ever more significant – aspect of contemporary academic life (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017; Deem, 1998). In such a competitive and highly measured environment, spaces for collegiality, compassion and kindness are challenging to find. Yet acts and interactions framed in such a light are viewed as vital to many academics' sense of value and meaning in academic work (see, e.g. Gibbs, 2017; Bresciani Ludvik, 2017; Zembylas, 2017). This paper explores academics' narratives of the relationship and practices that shape their career decisions and frame their academic practice, highlighting the everyday pressures that squeeze space for compassionate collegiality.

Institutional definitions of prestige and success intertwine with individuals' sense of value, career-progression and everyday work activity in varying ways, from active championing of dominant visions of 'excellence' through to varying forms of resistance, both passive and active (eg Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011; Lucas, 2014; Manathunga, Selkrig, Sadler, & Keamy, 2017). Faced with such challenges, increasing attention is being given to where academics find the support, value, motivation and – indeed – 'happiness' in their working lives (Clark & Sousa, 2018; Martin, 2011; Watson, 2009). Collegiality frequently proves to be a double-edged sword, with relations with peers varying from strong support and encouragement through to continual comparison, competition and the inducing of anxiety (MacFarlane, 2016).

This paper seeks to explore the contradictory, messy and refractory effects of the promotion of 'excellence' in higher education. Our approach draws on anthropological perspectives on development and 'improvement' initiatives, building on Scott's (1990) work on 'hidden transcripts', domination and resistance. This lens is used to explore the multiple interpretations of value and meaning in academic work, key points of resistance and challenge, and the impact these 'hidden transcripts' have on institutional and sectoral efforts to enhance university performance.

Specifically, we explore the detailed personal narratives of 23 academics based at Scottish universities, highlighting how they negotiate meaning and value in their work and view relations with colleagues and students. Participants shared their CVs and identified three artefacts (and the events and relationships associated with them) that were significant to their career journey. The



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resulting material offers insight into how participants saw themselves in relation to 'being an academic' and how they re-framed ideas of excellence to create meaning and 'happiness' in their work.

Through exploring these narratives, we turn to consider whether the concept of compassion offers a fruitful route to an alternative imagining and enacting of university work. We argue that, while such an approach casts much needed light on the tensions and contradictory 'pulls' of collegiality and success in contemporary universities, it risks sustaining an individualisation of pressure to be a 'good colleague' and exhibit compassion within the academy. A central challenge remains unresolved: how to effectively politicise this discourse, and to move, as Ortner (2016) argues, from the 'happiness turn' to the acknowledgement of critique and resistance. It is this shift that is key to understanding and challenging the dominance of neoliberalism and opening the potential to (re)build a context for 'good' university work.

### 2. Zombie universities and happy academics

The starting point for this paper is a recognition of the intertwining of two distinct threads of discussion about academic work and relationships. Firstly, the focus on measurement, prestige, and comparative / competitive notions of success which, with increasing intensity, frame the actions and interactions in and of universities. This has led to increasing critique of the 'zombification' of university practices, leadership, and staff (Smyth, 2017); Jones-Devitt, 2017). And, secondly, consideration of how this impacts on workloads, work practices, and how individual academics manage their performance to secure appropriate work-life balance. This has been accompanied by a turn towards well-being and 'self-help' style approaches to support academics to manage complex workloads, meet competing demands and become "happy academics" (Clark & Sousa, 2018). Through exploring the intertwining of institutional and individual experience of performativity and 'success' from the grounded perspective of everyday work and life within universities, we consider what space remains to critique and reframe the purpose and practices of universities.

#### Exploring the measured university

Measurement and the quantification of performance has become a ubiquitous feature of study and work in contemporary universities, with neo-liberal values, marketisation, competition and commodification infusing institutional cultures, practices and relationships (Deem, 1998; Sutton, 2017). On the one hand, we have seen increasing focus on exploring and refining those measurements to ensure they are as effective and appropriately framed as possible, be that measures of widening access, the questions that frame student satisfaction surveys, or how to measure learning gain and 'value-added' of university study. On the other, there is focus on the impact of measurement and – more broadly – cultures of managerialism on academic work, study and collegiate relations (Smith & Rattray, 2016; Tight, 2014). Recognising and valuing particular activities or outputs as 'excellent' creates a comparative and competitive culture that ensures particular ways of being 'a university' or 'successful academic' are privileged to the exclusion of alternative trajectories of impact and development (See Blackmore, 2016; Kandiko Howson, Coate, & de St Croix, 2018).

Alongside this consideration of the impact of this intertwining of prestige and performativity, there is increasing critique of the "toxic university" (Smyth, 2017) and the changes occurring in institutions because of funding and policy changes that have amplified the marketisation of higher education and the subsequent reform of priorities and working practices within institutions. This has led to the somewhat colourful critique of the 'zombification' of higher education, focused on the perceived corrosive and corroding effects of the current condition of higher education (Whelan, Walker, & Moore, 2013; Murphy 2017). The zombie trope is increasingly used to highlight the uncritical acceptance of managerialism, measures and language within policy and practice, and – indeed – models of teaching and learning that "refuse to die and keep coming back" (Grove, 2018a). However, it is the unrelenting focus on specific measures of excellence, league tables and rankings that are particularly singled out for concern as the core driver of 'zombie-like' behaviours and practices, narrowing the parameters and potential of higher education. As Brink (2018) notes, universities have "reacted to rankings like a baby given a rattle. They waved them around and made a noise." In doing so, he argues, the greatest threat to institutional autonomy faced by universities are not external threats but "our own vanity" and willingness to cede to a "one size fits all caricature of what universities are supposed to be like".

Success and prestige are not just a source of institutional challenge but are embodied in the lives of individual academics and experienced as personal pressure to succeed, as competition to progress and be appointed / promoted, and, for many, as an unrelenting, wide-ranging workload. This has intensified in a context of resource challenges and associated role insecurity, resulting in more acute surveillance and pressure on individuals to meet ever more challenging demands. This is reflected clearly in the increased awareness of the challenges faced by early career academics stuck in precarious, short-term contracts, and highlighted starkly in the individual cases of over-work, mental health challenges, and even suicide arising from work-pressures and concerns that they "were not fulfilling the metrics" (Grove, 2015; Bothwell, 2018; Pells, 2018). Pressure to perform, to produce appropriate outputs, to generate income, to exhibit measurable and comparable markers of excellence and prestige are a constant feature of both individual and institutional practice.

#### The happiness turn ... and beyond?

Recognition of demanding workloads of staff and increasing levels of stress-related mental health problems (Grove, 2018b) has led to the emergence of a plethora of guides and training proffering support to better perform and engage with work demands of the



contemporary university. HR departments now regularly offer a plethora of courses on establishing work-life balance, on managing complex workloads and the like. There has also been a growth in the scope and breadth of what could be termed academic 'self-help' literature: books to support academics navigate their complex workloads, to "write no matter what", and find meaning and happiness in their academic life (Clark & Sousa, 2018; Jensen, 2017; Reed 2017). Such emphasis focuses largely on self-management and the individual challenge of navigating the modern academic workplace and contributes to the "hyper individualization" of academic careers and success (Kandiko Howson et al, 2018, p. 542). Collegiality, then, is a double-edged sword which has "something of a 'golden age' mythic quality about it" (Tight, 2014, p. 302). Space for compassionate engagement and mutual support is limited in a wider culture of competition and strive for excellence. Success – and happiness – is in part relative and relational "and something that also appears when we compare ourselves to others – and 'win' by comparison" (The Happiness Research Institute, 2017).

This focus on happiness also runs conceptually deep, framing the focus of research and theoretical discussion. In the context of higher education studies and the exploration of academic work, for example, increasing attention is being paid to where people find value, authenticity and virtue in their work (Nixon, 2008; Gibbs, 2017; Cannizzo 2018). An interest in 'compassion, passion and even 'love' of higher education is presented in such literature as offering an alternative lens on the experience of higher education, its social impact and place as well as the everyday practices of teaching, leadership and research. Attention is given to "how compassion can be woven in the ethos of higher education" (Gibbs, 2017, p. 1).

Such a 'turn to happiness' echoes aspects of Ortner's (2016) observations in relation to anthropological trends, from 'dark anthropology' focused on the harsh dimensions of social life to studies of happiness and 'the good life'. She notes being startled by the emphasis on happiness, contentment and comfort amid a general trend to explore and theorise the "ubiquitous power and inequality" that pervades in the context of neoliberal dominance and worldviews but recognises that "it makes sense precisely as a reaction to that work". She cites Tobias Kelly's question as a way of understanding this turn, "At what point does an ethnography of suffering turn into a voyeuristic quasi-pornography?" (Ortner, 2016, p. 58). Focusing on what makes people happy, where they find value and meaning in their efforts offers an alternative lens to explore social relations and practices. Ortner's analysis highlights the interplay of these perspectives and the complexity and ambivalence in any discussion of 'happiness'. In doing so, it can become possible to consider "How can we be both realistic about the ugly realities of the world today and hopeful about the possibilities of changing them?" (p. 60). Here, she highlights the need to return to an "anthropology of resistance", encompassing both the critical study of the existing order and exploring "alternative futures" (2016, p. 66).

This interplay between discussion of 'suffering' and 'the good life' can be seen playing out in the higher education literature and research interests. The focus on the oppressive power of the 'measured university' on the one hand and, on the other, the drive and strive to navigate a path to personal well-being and happiness within this context does, however, open some space to consider where change and alternative ways of being in the university could emerge. Such constant exposure to comparison and pressure to 'be excellent' results in academic staff having to negotiate on an everyday basis which aspects of their role to prioritise and perform. The interplay between institutional definitions of success and individual sense of value, career-progression and everyday work activity takes many forms, from active engagement and championing of dominant visions of 'excellence', selective compliance, through to varying forms of resistance, both passive and active (e.g. Lucas, 2014; Manathunga et al, 2017; MacFarlane, 2016). In such contexts, acts of compassion and kindness can, potentially, be sources of resistance, opening critical and strategic space for transforming action (Zembylas, 2017; Gibbs, 2017)

To deepen and nuance our understanding of resistance, compliance and subversion of dominant narratives of success and excellence we have turned in our study to the work of the anthropologist James Scott and his consideration of 'domination and the arts of resistance' (Scott, 1990; see also Scott 1998, 2010). Specifically, we seek to explore the 'public' and 'hidden transcripts' that interact in the everyday practices of the university and the tensions and contradictions such transcripts reveal. This approach opens space to understand the interplay between acquiescence with dominant narratives and the 'offstage' questioning, challenging and development of alternative transcripts.

### 3. Exploring narratives of becoming and being an academic: methodological considerations

Drawing on this interest in spaces and discourses of resistance, we explore here the situated experience of academics, their pathway into academic work and their (changing) perceptions of success. Given our interest in public and 'hidden transcripts' of excellence and collegiality, we sought to develop a methodology that enabled participants to introduce and explore their perspectives of academic life in ways and in terms that were meaningful to them. Drawing on narrative inquiry, we have sought to capture the complexity of the participants' lives alongside the teasing out of common themes and experiences (Leavy, 2015, p. 41-2)

Narrative interviews were conducted with 23 academics based at Scottish universities, a broadly even mix of mid and early career academics, female and male, research-intensive and post-92 universities. An invitation to participate in the study was cascaded via various networks across the Scottish sector, with respondents self-identifying as being in an 'academic post' and being either mid or early career. An initial screening process was undertaken to clarify whether people were currently in academic posts and met the broad criteria for the study. However, as the work developed, it became clear that categories such as 'academic' and indeed, mid and early career, were themselves opaque and open to varied interpretations and even self-critique within the context of the discussion of the individual's career trajectory.

To facilitate the exploration of public-facing and more hidden transcripts of academic success, participants were invited, prior to the interview, to send in their CVs (or equivalent) and to identify three artefacts (photos, physical items, key events) that were significant



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to them in the context of their academic career. These artefacts – and the associated narratives and explanation – provided the starting point for the discussion, allowing the conversations to be genuinely participant-led (Ravetz & Ravetz, 2017). As Ingold (2010) notes, any ‘thing’ contains within it “a certain gathering together of the threads of life” (p. 4). Through the narratives that flowed from individual artefacts we were able to explore with participants the various threads which shaped and influenced their experience of university work, perceptions of excellence, and creativity.

The artefacts were incredibly varied. Key markers of academic transitions such as PhD certificates and graduation photos, first publications, awards and accreditations were widely presented, as were more personal markers of transition such as photographs of children and events associated with family decisions. Other choices were more eclectic: A pottery house, a travel notebook, a brooch, a pile of conference badges, film scripts, a homemade reward chart. The introduction of the physical object or recounting of a particular incident was the first thread in the weaving of a colourful narrative tapestry of their experience of becoming and being an academic. For example, one participant offered up a photograph of a group of students holding a skull in a laboratory. The narrative that flowed from this focused on the political and personnel shifts within the department she had worked in, the impact of the REF on the value of teaching. She lamented the challenges of the job, but came back to her primary career motivation, “these wee students with their wee skull and their wee happy faces” (Elizabeth).

Our approach here drew on – and echoed in its complexity – debates in feminist methodologies and ethics, particularly regarding concerns about the readily established trust between interviewer / interviewees (Bloom & Sawin, 2009; Harding 1997; Doucet & Mauthner, 2012). Our own positions, as researchers and as mid and early-career academics ourselves, clearly contributed to the ready rapport that was established with most interviewees and led to numerous episodes of assumed understanding and, indeed, revelation of experience, that interviewees themselves acknowledged that they may not have spoken to others about. As Jack notes:

*There are things that I have told you that I would never tell my colleagues. You do build up these personas and to be open about, even now even though I am long gone from that world, to say I used to take my conference badge off because I didn't have confidence in my own work and I didn't want to talk to people, I wouldn't say that to people who knew me and worked with me because I think they would judge me on that, rightly or wrongly.*

We were aware of the possibility of these discussions becoming almost therapeutic for some participants (see Leavy, 2015, p. 15), an outlet for sharing concerns and anxieties that they had not been able to discuss in other fora. This posed particular challenges in writing up this work: ensuring anonymity of participants whilst capturing the richness of the narratives has required deftness of presentation and detailed review to ensure no unanticipated identifiable features were exposed. In addition, our key methodology of (primarily) visually-based artefacts operating as a springboard into narrative disclosure, also lead to some highly personal (and identifiable) material being presented. We have therefore not been able to share the detail of many of those pieces, instead relying on the retelling of narratives in anonymised form (including the use of pseudonyms) and the description rather than display of artefacts. Through the analysis that follows, we have, however, aimed to retain a strong sense of the voice and tone of the original narratives whilst exploring and “configuring” the emerging themes (Kim, 2006, p. 4).

### 4. Negotiating success in the measured university

These narratives of life in the measured university provided insight into everyday navigation of indicators of esteem and pressures to demonstrate ‘excellence’. They highlighted the fragility of many participants’ sense of academic ability and identity, how they saw their own work and how they felt they were perceived by others. Crucial to this was their relationship with both generalised and specific colleagues as source of competition and, at times, comfort and encouragement. Specific relationships and acts of generosity of time, advice and guidance were frequently cited as significant in helping individuals make key transitions in their career and in sustaining day-to-day motivation and commitment to their work. This contrasts with the pervasive sense of pressure to demonstrate excellence and success across a plethora of dimensions of work and, in many instances, in competition with colleagues. Here we unpack these themes in more depth, exploring the intertwining narratives of competition, comparison and the impact this has on space for compassionate collegiality.

#### Being (an) academic

Particularly striking in the narratives were the deep-rooted perceptions of academic ability that sustained and shaped their contemporary experience of being ‘an academic’. Many participants, unprompted, wove childhood, familial, and school-related events into the discussion of what being (an) academic and working in the university context meant to them. Long-held assumptions about their capabilities impacted on their contemporary sense of self – positively and negatively. For some, there was a presumption of academic success, with university careers perceived as an appropriate, indeed anticipated, progression. Being academic, as one noted, was “part of the fibre of who I am” while another highlighted how she had grown up knowing there was “a space on the wall [in her parents’ house] for our graduation photos”. For others, the shift to university work was considered challenging due to lasting perceptions of (poor) school performance and memories of being told that they were “just not academic enough”. There was, then, a pervasive sense of the fragility of academic identity and the importance, extending from a young age, of the validation of others in sustaining – or indeed damaging – it.

Transition points into university work presented a point of individual vulnerability where intellectual ability, sense of academic capability and professional identity were particularly fragile and open to challenge. Belonging and ‘being’ in academic life required



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the engagement with markers of success as well as confidence in intellectual capabilities. Attaining PhDs was seen – particularly for those transferring into university careers from industry or professional practice – as a salient marker of change in status and role. Many participants presented their move into university work as accidental, accompanied by discussion of how they were “a fraud” and not, ‘a real academic’.

Such ‘othering’ of what it means to be an academic cross-cut the narratives of participants from all levels and backgrounds, from a full professor who noted their “intellectual limitations as a researcher” through to a mid-career lecturer who felt intimidated by younger academics. Others referred to their work as not being as academic as those who worked as part of a “proper university” or contrasted their professional or industry background to those who had come through “real academic routes”. Jack, for example, noted he reached a point in his academic career when he realised he was – comparatively – less ‘academic’ than his peers, a point that coincided with him deciding to move away from research-focused work to a more teaching-oriented role. As he notes:

*I was falling out of love with the research; I was not so motivated to be part of that any more. This, to be honest, was really a bit of a personal crisis. This had been my trajectory since I was about ten or something absurd like that. So I had almost institutionalised myself. Where do you go from there? ... This is a very, very cut throat world. There are people who are literally working from the moment they get up in the morning to when they go to bed at night. I know because I have stayed over at their houses: you get up in the morning and they are making breakfast with literally one hand on the laptop keyboard. And you think, what are you doing? This is insane. (Jack)*

Throughout the narratives the building of an academic identity was founded on both comparison with (often abstract) ‘others’ and the validation of ability from (often specific) peers.

### Navigating pathways to ‘excellence’

Transecting participants’ narratives was an interplay between dominant institutional perceptions of ‘excellence’ and individuals’ alternative constructions of professional success. Several participants stated that they ‘hated the word’ and expressed concern with even attempting to measure it. As Stephanie noted:

*I have this problem with constantly going on about excellence because...[whisper] I hate that word. There’s always emails going, “This person has done this amazing thing. They’ve got this award. They’ve got this money. They’ve got this thing”. And it’s, sort of like, great. So you’re just saying the rest of us are not good enough? I also have a concern about the way that it’s seen in terms of students sometimes. Students are like, you know, this person’s amazing because they are there all the time, 24/7, on the end of the phone or email if you want them. And it’s like, actually that’s not sustainable... you know, when you look at things like promotion criteria, which require excellence in all these things, you think, well that’s not achievable by any human being. (Stephanie)*

The pressure to develop a personal portfolio of excellence was compounded by the way such discourse was saturating institutional practice. It is not surprising, then, that the CVs submitted as part of the research study followed a common pattern, highlighting awards, funding and income generation, research publications – the anticipated and institutionally-valued markers of success and personal prestige.

However, participants were clear they were ‘playing the game’ of prestige and success, contrasting the picture of success presented in their CVs to their personal discomfort with indicator-driven notions of excellence. The REF, for example was regarded as highly abstract in terms of the impact and change that it could generate.

*I was describing the REF to somebody yesterday. You have to produce something completely outstanding and world leading, but you have no idea what the criteria for outstanding and world leading are yet because it’s going to be judged by a panel of people who haven’t been arranged yet, who don’t exist yet, who haven’t told you what the criteria are. But you already have to be producing this stuff now... (Linda)*

This opaqueness was contrasted with the ‘hidden transcripts’ of personal satisfaction, motivation and sense of ‘success’ participants felt from actually being able to see direct impact of their research and of ‘making a difference’ in an everyday sense. Success in academic life, for many participants, was visible in the longevity of their relationships with students and the mutuality of the care and consideration that emerged. Indeed, students were often discussed in familial terms – the pride in seeing ‘generations of graduates’ pass through, of the responsibility felt in teaching “other people’s children”. Rewards from students – be that formal student awards or the informal emails, conversations, and continued engagement beyond a course of study, were valued above all other indicators of esteem and success. Throughout the narratives, the strongest use of language of care and reward in academic life came in discussions of the strength of relationships and long-term commitment to students, frequently contrasted with the almost fleeting ‘pleasures’ of badges of institutionally-valued excellence.

Participants frequently listed the broad range of areas they were working in and in which they had to demonstrate exceptional performance levels. Earlier career professionals and those at mid-career seeking promotion were, perhaps not surprisingly, particularly strongly striving to ‘do it all’. For example, Michelle noted:

*I always take on a lot. And sometimes it is a real balancing act, and I am quite tired a lot of the time. But I don’t think I’m taking on too much. I think it’s absolutely my judgement as to what I take on.... It doesn’t mean that I don’t sometimes feel a bit overwhelmed, but then who doesn’t? .... Yeah, I think being excellent in my particular role, for me, involves not just doing*



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*what is on my job description, it probably means taking on extra stuff. So when there's an opportunity to volunteer for something, it probably means volunteering for it. (Michelle)*

The pressure to perform 'excellence' across a plethora of domains did take its toll, with narratives peppered with discussion of anxiety, stress and mental health concerns. This is powerfully demonstrated in the case of Linda. She presented a mug that had been given to her as a celebratory gift at the end of a large research project. On the outside of the mug was printed an extract of the data from the study. However, rather than this being a source of pride and celebration, she noted that the whole project experience had been so lonely and challenging that she could not bring herself to look at or use the mug. Her narrative continued with the introduction of a third artefact – a self-made 'reward chart'. She used this – privately – to give herself stickers when she completed a task or piece of work, to keep herself motivated in the face of what felt like an unsurmountable set of demands on her time.

There was also recognition that the 'game' appeared monolithic in its rules, with an expectation that everyone would be able to tick the same boxes or, as Elizabeth noted, where "everybody has to be a brick, the same size and the same colour and the same shape and the same direction". This proved particularly challenging for those transferring from industry into academia later in their careers. Alan, for example, highlighted this:

*I thought that they'd come running to make me a professor, that's what I thought. I thought, 25 years in film and television. I saw who were the professors, and I thought, it's a no-brainer. And of course, what I did was get a job as a lecturer. Because it wasn't the experience they needed the evidence of research, and the evidence of teaching ability.*

Throughout the narratives the pervasive sense of performance and self-management, of playing the game for an external audience whilst attempting to sustain a more personal sense of meaning and value. The compassion of everyday interactions and support for students, the drive to 'make a difference' was seen as a counter to the more visible performance of acts of excellence.

### Collegiality: competition, kindness and compassion

Many of the narratives of anxiety, stress and workload were infused with comparison to colleagues. Excellence and success were relative, not absolute – be that in terms of measurable outputs, hours worked or personal promotion and advancement. Comparison of volume and quality of work was ever-present. Relationships with colleagues are therefore somewhat double-edged: a source of support and encouragement at key junctures, yet a challenging – and at times corrosive – source of competition at others.

The importance of compassionate collegiality – in abstraction and in terms of named individuals – was evident in the narratives and in the choice of artefacts. The 'hidden transcripts' of excellence presented frequently highlighted the importance of kindness and generosity as traits valued in colleagues. As Matthew noted,

*An excellent academic would be supportive of other colleagues, would be able to recognise and acknowledge their successes. So there's also that sort of academic collegiate aspect that I think is really important that quite often is lacking. An excellent academic would also be not simply producing articles but also demonstrating how to do that for other colleagues, supporting them in doing that rarely happens unless they're getting a publication co-authored. An excellent academic would be less self-promotional. (Matthew)*

There was widespread experience of such kindness from specific individual colleagues. This was accompanied by strong appreciation and highly emotional testimony for the named individuals who had made a significant difference to the direction of individuals' careers. This is well-represented in the narrative of Ben, a mid-career lecturer who presented, as his first artefact, a photograph of himself with colleagues at a student awards dinner. This, he explained, represented how much he had felt looked after by people who had taught him and worked with him. He pinpointed named individuals who had supported him in his transition into teaching and pushed him to stretch himself. He then discussed his loneliness, now those he had looked to for support had retired. Ben's story was echoed in many other narratives, with support from specific senior colleagues and mentors playing a key role in shaping careers and building academic confidence.

This was, however, widely contrasted with a darker side to collegiality, of competition and – at times – outright obstruction. Rachel, for example, spoke passionately about the kindness and support she received from one colleague who guided her when she embarked on PhD study. He was, "a wonderful wise old owl... a real wise old school academic and very supportive". However, the value of his support became particularly apparent as she explained the reaction of other members of her team who had actively tried to dissuade her from taking on doctoral study and, indeed, told her not to do it as she "had a husband and kids to look after". This was echoed in the accounts of other participants who noted cases of significant individual support and generosity of ideas and time alongside examples of where they felt others had deliberately attempted to "clip their wings", steal work, or spread rumours about performance.

The competitiveness with immediate colleagues – in the same lab, department or discipline – was pervasive across many of the narratives. Indeed, some participants highlighted this as a key factor in them changing roles or looking for alternative pathways to success". However, it is the subtler efforts to promote a sense of relative success (potentially at the expense of others) that were the focus of much discussion. This was felt particularly acutely by Laura, a mid-career academic who was frustrated by what she saw as the illusion of 'doing it all' she saw others promoting.

*I have colleagues who say, 'Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm part-time. I do this, I don't work, I get all this done'. And I know they are working in the evenings, I know they are. I wouldn't be married if I worked my evenings and weekends... I know people who work a day, go home and put their kids to bed, eat their dinner and then start working again.... I come from a working-class*



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*family and my dad would be appalled if he found out I didn't take all my holiday allocation. I've got colleagues here who send their partners off on holiday with their children and carry on working. I know someone who did it last week. But they are still trying to maintain this atmosphere of 'yeah, I'm part-time, I can do all this stuff'. And it is like, no, you can't. (Laura)*

Against this backdrop, it was perhaps not surprising to see participants exploring alternative sources of support and mentorship. Paying for external career coaching emerged in the narratives of several of the participants, whilst others highlighted the importance of familial or even spiritual support as a route for exploring career choices and making decisions in a more trusted environment. This 'going external' for support sat alongside a more ambivalent view towards institutional training and the proffering of courses in work-life balance. It was also mirrored in a lack of generosity with their own time. Even those who noted most strongly that they had benefitted from the support of others were circumspect about their commitment to others. Jack referred to the "dark side of collegiality" and the pressure he felt to do things out of obligation and a sense of duty. Similarly, Laura felt her recent experience being knocked-back for promotion and of engaging in career-coaching had "flipped a switch" and made her "more selfish and less willing to be collegiate". Even Ben, who had benefitted so much from his senior colleagues, felt he had no time to offer support to others.

### Resistance and its limits

This leaves us with the question of who can afford to be compassionate in a culture infused with policies, practices and promotion criteria that privilege individual success and measurement of (comparative) excellence. To what extent can public transcripts of excellence be resisted? There remains a tension in the everyday practice of academics between their institutional progression and promotion, finding a sense of value that has resonance for them personally, and establishing a sustainable balance in the amount and scope of work undertaken.

Open resistance to the dominant discourse is – as in the case of the peasant-lordship relations in Scott's (1990) work – risky and therefore often expressed through subtle actions. Those who choose *not* to play the game recognise there may well be repercussions – in this case the risk of limited promotion or employment prospects.

The narratives presented here reveal several cases where participants have made an active decision to shift the parameters of excellence that they work by. However, they do so whilst recognising that this may marginalise them. As Jack notes:

*One of the big bonuses of being peripheral is that I can choose to live outside the eco-system of the Research Excellence Framework... So I am navigating that by not playing. The only winning move is not to play.*

This active decision not to play to the pressures to perform and compete underpins much of the everyday resistance that was revealed in the narratives. Not taking on the pressure to 'be excellent' or to be seen to acquiesce with a long-hours, high-output culture was cited by several respondents as an active choice and decision viz. how they wished to 'be an academic'.

*I'm less willing to let the institution dictate my priorities. So, like, I know I need to be in line with the institution's priorities, and I'm really happy to do that. I recognise that they've given me a lot of chances that I've had... But, in terms of what I'm going to do, and what kind of academic I'm going to be, I think I get to decide that. And, I think a lot of people haven't quite twigged that yet. I think that's part of this pressure to be excellent. (Kate)*

For these participants there was an explicit recognition of the power that came from not being beholden to the 'game' of excellence. Leanne, for example, noted that she had specific professional skills that were highly sought after and which she felt had a value beyond the dominant narrative of excellence. This led her to note that:

*I know a lot of people who work in universities and feel like they are stuck, that they feel 'what would I do if I didn't have this job?' They think 'you know, I went to university, studied and I did a PhD and I grafted and did this and I've moved my way up. That just isn't the case for us. They [the university] need us delivering the course more than we need to be here. I think that kind of power being wielded...that kind of power, however subtle within the university, makes a massive difference.*

While, in the main, resistance to dominant transcripts remained subtle, hidden in everyday practice of 'not doing' or subverting particular demands and interests, it did at points emerge more overtly in our participants narratives. During the period of our fieldwork, one of the main university unions, the UCU, called a strike ostensibly over pension benefits. The strike, however, came to represent far more than this, developing into a very public challenge to dominant transcripts of excellence and visions of the direction that university education was taking.

This context was reflected in the discussions we had with participants about how they viewed their role, their relationships with their university and with their colleagues. Holly presented this particularly strongly:

*What being an academic means to me at the moment is great difficulty in having a decent work and rest of life balance. It means I'm a small cog in a sometimes-crushingly large machine, in a neoliberal marketised system, which is really disturbing... So today what it means to me to be an academic is to be somebody who's out there on the picket line trying to explain why the strike is not just about our pensions but that this whole pensions thing has come about because of the marketisation of the university sector. So it's about things that I don't want as well as things I do want.*



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However, the limits of solidarity were also visible in our participants' engagement with the strike. Those who were on strike noted that the act of active resistance had created space for communicating and connecting with colleagues (and in some cases students) in ways that they had not done previously, space that could be seen as genuinely compassionate and generating a sense of 'co-suffering'. Yet, one early career researcher noted that she had "sneaked in" to work direct from the picket line as she felt she had to complete a research paper before applying for a job. Another mid-career academic noted her concern with being employed part-time and her worry that having most of the strike days on her working days meant she would be disproportionately disadvantaged and have more to make-up on her return to the office. Should she, she mused, strike part-time in order not to be at a disadvantage in comparison to her colleagues? The act of striking – the overt challenge to the measured university – had itself become a source of tension, comparison and insecurity.

### 5. Exploring compassion, reframing success

Where, then, does this leave us in terms of a narrative of compassion, kindness and generosity in academic life? While it may conceptually provide a fresh and emotive counterpoint to narratives of measurement and the 'zombification' of university life, what practical mileage can be gained from this turn to 'compassion'?

Participants talked passionately about the support that helped them at pivotal junctures of their career. This time, encouragement and kindness came from specific mentors or colleagues. In a similar vein, the individuals' sense of value and meaning in their academic life was frequently framed in terms of making a difference, particularly to the lives and learning of students. Compassion in the pedagogic relationship was central to much of the discourse, which was infused with a language of care and 'walking with' students through their learning journeys and beyond. The mutuality of this relationship was stressed – the compassion and care shown by students to lecturers was particularly valued and seen as representative of a successful learning-teaching relations (see resonance with Gibbs, 2017; Gill & Ursuleanu 2017).

Despite the recognition of the importance of care and compassion, many of the narratives presented acts of generosity in almost subversive ways, a counter to the dominant narrative of 'academic success'. While individuals publicly herald and reinforce the dominant transcripts of prestige and excellence, they continue to seek alternative ways of relating to and supporting others. Compassion is in continual interplay with perceived institutional dispassion and the almost 'tyrannical' focus on metrics and measurable indicators of esteem (Gourlay & Stephenson, 2017). Indeed, the impression is given of kindness and generosity as something that is almost furtive and certainly at the fringes of people's public transcripts of success. This is particularly clear in the strong sense that emerges of the risks associated with being too generous with time or ideas, too open to supporting colleagues or students. Being supportive of others jeopardises being able to advance individual careers and develop prestige and institutionally recognised value. The fear seen in relation to collegiality (McFarlane, 2016) is reflected here in a fear of generosity: while it may herald an alternative way of being in academia, it also poses considerable risk in terms of drain on already depleted personal resources and capacity.

There is a need, then, to consider how narratives of compassion and generosity can be reframed from individual choice or an individual act of resistance, to a reframing of institutional culture. While there is recognition of the detrimental impact universities' current strive for 'excellence' is having on staff interactions and workloads, this is largely de-politicised in institutional contexts. Attention is given to personal resilience, finding work-life balance, and individuals developing soft-skills to manage everyday interactions. The more socially-oriented concept of 'compassion' offers a fresh perspective from which to explore and reframe these everyday interactions within the university and consider the practical and political steps required to create supportive work environments.

Returning to Scott (1990), there is a need then to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between power, domination and acts of resistance. Alternative ways of being, alternative discourses of university purpose and practice are hidden in existing transcripts and everyday small acts of resistance and subversion. As Smyth notes, "The starting point for contesting the neoliberal university resides in disavowal – that is to say, we need to stop deluding ourselves into believing that we need to continue endorsing stupid ideas" (Smyth, 2017). Our participants narratives highlight the practical difficulties in pursuing this – on the one hand searching for alternative ways of valuing their academic efforts yet remaining caught in a pervasive web of 'excellence'. In the context of competitive metrics of success and the structures that sustain and amplify 'the measured university', the scope to move to a more politicised, collective reappraisal of what comprises 'good work' remains limited.

A compassion lens can, perhaps, give us a potential guide for rebuilding and reinventing relationships across a range of university practices – compassion in institutional policy, compassion in use of measurement, compassion as a key consideration in success. But a focus on compassion cannot negate the need for a parallel engagement with the everyday political challenge required to build institutional change. Specifically, as our narratives here highlight, there is a need to consider how to move beyond a realisation that 'something is wrong' with existing visions of excellence to considering how this can be reimaged and practically applied.

### Biographies

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