Tempered radicalism

A model for navigating academic practice and identity in the twenty-first-century neoliberal university?

Marita le Vaul-Grimwood, Vani Naik, Cameron Graham, Zack Moir and Fiona Smart

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Abstract

This article explores Meyerson and Scully's concept of 'tempered radicalism' (1995) in the context of contemporary academic practice and identity. We report on a collaborative autoethnographic study which addressed the question: 'What does the concept of tempered radicalism mean to us as academics in contemporary higher education?'. We explore how the concept of tempered radicalism allows us to consider our own actions and abilities to drive change within an increasingly challenging higher education environment moulded by the policies, values and practices of neoliberal economics. In this context, we share differing perspectives on what it means to bring a values-based criticality to our work. It is the breadth of Meyerson and Scully's concept which allows us to approach this exploration in a way which emphasises commonality rather than difference and facilitates collaboration. This article therefore showcases the utility of tempered radicalism to academics with a range of perspectives.

Keywords

academic identity, academic practice, collaborative autoethnography, criticality, tempered radicalism

This article is a collaborative autoethnographic exploration of Debra Meyerson and Maureen Scully's idea of 'tempered radicalism' (1995) from the differing perspectives of five academics working in a large, teaching-focussed Scottish university. Meyerson and Scully drew on their experiences to describe tempered radicalism as a spectrum of behaviours which allow those at odds with the values of their organisation, to stay within and enact change. Those who they define as 'tempered radicals' often use

small actions as a way of effecting 'evolutionary' change. What makes these actions 'tempered' is that they avoid creating too much of a sense of threat to the institution and its structures. Nevertheless, such actions can marginalise the individual and alienate others. Paraphrasing Meyerson and Scully (1995), and Meyerson (2001) the following five characteristics of tempered radicals have been central to our understanding:

1. They speak their truths: they 'will not allow the dominant culture to define who they are' (Meyerson 2001: 14).
2. While they may be isolated in their immediate work context, they seek out like-minded people and may rely on strong external support networks.
3. They have a bias toward action, which is values-driven.
4. They have clarity about and a laser-like focus on their most important goals.
5. They promote, through their example and advocacy, experimentation and deep professional conversations, fostering others' learning.

Debra Meyerson (2001: xxi) explains that commonly 'the means of tempered radicalism may be incremental and local'. Consequently, they exercise a form of leadership which may 'remain invisible even to those who they are meant to help' (Meyerson 2001: 51). These tempered radicals who 'persist quietly' (Meyerson 2001: 51) may be hard to see despite their capacity to rock the boat.

The concept of tempered radicalism is more risky than immediately apparent. For example, working for change on the inside over long periods can impact on the authentic self because maintaining an outward conformity at odds with one's own ideals can result in anxiety and guilt. Such discomfort relates to Flora Stormer and Kay Devine's finding (2008: 129) that value incongruity can have a significant negative psychological impact. Michael Flood and colleagues (2013) identify problems connected with adjusting to institutional agendas and the possibility that as people progress in their careers, they become more averse to taking risks because they have more at stake. Alternatively, it may be that they just do not see the issues anymore because they have become acculturated into the system, no longer holding the somewhat precarious – arguably – outsider-within position. While one may imagine that the more senior an academic becomes, the more agency they have to be more radical given their secure employment or tenure, this requires investigation

to confirm or refute. Other risks to tempered radicals might be reputational damage because slow progress may look like inaction and burnout from trying hard over a long period yet seeming to make little impact.

It is these complexities surrounding tempered radicalism that we wished to explore. Having first come together around the general idea of tempered radicalism, we then sought to explore its utility in detail, where it enabled us to better understand our own identities and practices in our higher education context. The overarching research question which guided us was 'What does the concept of tempered radicalism mean to us as practitioners in the context of our working practice in UK higher education?'.

Method

The project grew out of a chance discussion between some of the authors. Four of the five authors knew each other to varying degrees; the fifth joined the team via an open invitation, circulated within the university community. All of us were employed, in different ways, in a modern university in Scotland, UK, with different lengths and types of academic and professional experience at universities in the UK and internationally. Table 1 provides details of each author and their positions at the time of writing. Throughout, we use these initials to distinguish between the different and sometimes conflicting perspectives which the five authors brought to the discussion. As our discussion explores, the authors' individual positions within the institution, as well as aspects of positionality including race and gender, influence their perspectives on tempered radicalism. We therefore agreed that this background information was important to include.

Autoethnography was selected as the research method. It is a form of ethnographic work which situates the lived experience of the researcher at the centre of the study and considers autobiographic material from the researcher as primary data. The analysis and interpretation of behaviours, experiences or actions as individuals or in relation to others is what separates this from simple autobiography, for example (Chang 2007). Autoethnography is often concerned with connecting the self to the field and, in doing so, makes the personal political (Holman-Jones 2005). Collaborative ethnography includes joint reflection with others and critique of personal stories and looking at these through a given conceptual and theoretical lens (Nordbäck et al. 2022), which in this case is tempered radicalism. Paulina Wężniejewska and colleagues (2020: 341) capture the essence of collabora-

Table 1. Background information of each author.

Initials	Contextual introduction
FS	FS is a Visiting Professor and Learning and Teaching Enhancement Consultant. Her value base is directly influenced by her first discipline – nursing. Care and concern for others matters.
MG	MG is an Associate Professor in Curriculum Design, having moved into learning and teaching from her original discipline of literary studies. For her, tempered radicalism describes the challenges arising from strategic learning and teaching work in universities, where there is a need for a criticality whose implications are rarely straightforward or fully realisable.
ZM	An Associate Professor of Music who is strongly influenced by critical pedagogy. For ZM, social justice, democracy, and humanisation are inextricably linked to educational experiences/practices, which leads to his abhorrence of the perpetuation of unjust socioeconomic situations through many of the values and policies of contemporary HE.
CG	CG is a Lecturer in Academic Practice, influenced by experience developing as a critical person during his undergraduate study in a business school, who views education as empowering and transformative where a just and democratic society is based on educated citizenry.
VN	VN is a Researcher Developer and doctoral researcher, who is aligned with critical approaches from discovering critical discourse analysis in her Masters degree and has taken that through to a critical management studies approach in her PhD, in which she is researching inequality within academia.

tive autoethnography saying, ‘it is a meeting of people who . . . decided to share (with themselves, with others) their own internal world. It is the writing of people connected by some invisible thread’.

Wężniejewska et al. (2020) explain that it facilitates a process that makes it possible to bring together subjectivism, perception and the objectivism of described events. In this process, emotions come through, offering insight into perspectives other than that of the solo autoethnographer (Wężniejewska et al. 2020). Put differently, Chang et al. (2016: 11) explain collaborative autoethnography as ‘a process and product of an ensemble of performance, not a solo act’ enabling co-researchers to make sense of their own perspectives and experiences while engaging with those of others.

As an individual research method, autoethnography has drawn criticism. For example, Judith Lapadat (2017: 589) states that despite its ideological promise, lack of distance between the subject and the researcher – the researcher being the subject of their own research – narrows its potential

scope, limiting opportunities to translate personal experience into sociocultural and political action. In contrast, collaborative autoethnography with its multivocal approach 'builds upon and extends the reach of autoethnography and addresses some of its methodological and ethical issues'. Lapadat (2017: 589) adds: 'Collaborative autoethnography supports a shift from individual to collective agency, thereby offering a path toward personally engaging, nonexploitative, accessible research that makes a difference'.

It was this which drew us. We understood its capacity to support a process of listening, sharing, talking, challenging (Smart et al. 2021). It afforded us the chance to pause, in the busyness of academic life, with the intention of reflecting critically on the ever-changing context of higher education. We were continually conscious of Denzin's (2003, cited in Lapadat 2017) hope for both autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. For him, it is 'a political performance of resistance', that is both 'interpretative and performative', always looking 'to move audiences to action' (Lapadat 2017: 591). We shared this hope as we created our narrative which coalesces the personal, the professional, the individual, and the collective.

Data were gathered in two phases, each of which provided us with an opportunity to explore our research questions: (1) how do we each understand the concept of tempered radicalism?; and (2) to what extent is it useful to us in our roles within the university? First, we each shared a short piece of writing which explored personal perspectives on tempered radicalism. Four of us wrote reflective texts; one a poem. Second, after we each engaged with and considered each other's writings, we came together online for an open, free-flowing conversation – informed by our written texts – which allowed us to facilitate and share our thinking on the concept.

A recording of our conversation was fully transcribed and checked by each group member to ensure accuracy of meaning. The reflective texts and the conversation transcript were the focus of a collaborative thematic analysis, which we saw as a group 'sense-making' process. By focusing on identifying 'patterns of meaning' in the data we sought to 'make sense of [our] collective or shared meanings and experiences' (Braun and Clarke 2012: 57) of the tempered radicalism concept. The themes identified and retrieved from our analysis are discussed in the paragraphs where we share the 'findings' of our collective autoethnographic study in narrative essay form, offering our thoughts alongside those in the scholarly literature, aiming to present a critical and situated account in which we developed a shared understanding of key epistemological and axiological aspects of

the concept. This process was discursive and iterative, and thus thematic analysis was particularly useful.

Below we offer our thoughts alongside those in related literature aiming to present a critical situated account of our reflective discussion of tempered radicalism relative to our context of work.

Dissatisfaction with the contemporary higher education context as a catalyst for tempered radicalism

Our engagement with tempered radicalism stemmed from a shared goal of exploring what it means to bring a values-based criticality to our work in twenty-first century higher education. Most of our concerns can be linked, in different ways and to differing degrees, to the current situation in which 'universities are now asked to participate actively in the widening inequalities associated with a neoliberal global market order' (Holmwood 2014: 62), witnessed, for example, in the ranking and measures of universities and their 'successes'. As Paul Sutton (2017: 625) argues, the neoliberal model of the 'university of excellence' is deeply problematic: he contends that 'the university economy is no longer structured by the moral norm of education as a public good. It has been restructured, commodified and marketized by neoliberal capitalism'. For example, recruitment targets mean that practices are not always in the best interests of potential students, such as an over-reliance on international students whose English language standards may not be ideal for degree-level study, with huge educational and financial implications for such students in particular.

It can be argued that normative practices within contemporary higher education serve the needs of the economy (Hohendahl 2011), emphasising career benefits conferred on individuals rather than the societal benefits of an educated population. From such a perspective, universities might be seen to 'now serve primarily capitalist purposes . . . often in collusion with business in confusing job training with education' (Woodford 2018: 2). Ronald Barnett's view that the university is now 'a business securing its position in the marketplace' (1997: 170) and that 'principles of cost effectiveness, economic efficiency and quality assurance' dominate (Sutton 2017: 628) resonates even now to various degrees with the authors.

Within this context we see significant challenges, pressures and threats to 'our ability to act in accordance with some of the values that drew us to higher education in the first place'. And we recognise the complex network

of identities, relationships and power structures we must navigate (further problematised by the COVID-19 pandemic). In the words of Karen Gravett and colleagues (2021: 1):

> The importance of relationships, of connections and of care, within learning and teaching, have recently come to the fore more sharply within HE as a means to think beyond an uncaring neoliberal, competitive and individualising HE system.

Connections and care for others as explored by Gravett et al. (2021) are stark reminders, if they were needed, that it is *people* who populate the spaces of the university, and it is people who question their place and purpose within it. The question of the individual's place within the academy is explored persuasively by Jessica Wren Butler (2021: 19), who finds the prevalence of imposter syndrome at all positions in academic and professional hierarchies in higher education:

> Audit culture; managerialism; institutional and sectoral assessments of quality, performance, and productivity; these things create an environment where participation is reliant on earning a place and where the necessary achievements could always be more or better, either objectively or in comparison to others. Furthermore, it locates the issue in the individual, whereas I would argue that any space dominated by competitiveness is fundamentally hostile – especially one where failures are more frequent than successes, losses more than wins, and rejections more than acceptances.

Hannah Alpert-Abrams' (2022) creation of a workbook to help people working in higher education better identify and work to their sense of purpose, further speaks to a growing awareness that individuals in contemporary universities are likely to experience threat to their sense of place, purpose and identity.

Given our similar concerns about the competitive and individualising nature of contemporary higher education, we recognise that our radicalism, tempered or otherwise, stems in large part from the ways in which we, as critical educators/researchers, find ourselves positioned within it. How, then, do we understand the notion of tempered radicalism, and how is this comprehension shaped and cultivated by and within the context previously described? Our methodology brought to the surface our differing and even conflicting perspectives on this question. For CG, the 'juxtaposition' of words is unhelpful:

> To me they don't sit well together – tempered and radical. . . . I think they clash. . . . I think for me this concept of the tempered radical . . . relates to criticality in the Academy. . . . And I think that this tempered radical could be one lens to view it but . . . I don't know if it's enough.

Thus, for CG, tempered radicalism has limited value but might 'work as a heuristic device' which can be used to begin conversations as a step towards critical action.

Similarly, ZM was concerned that placing 'tempered' alongside 'radicalism' somehow diminished the latter and risked 'perpetuating the problematic status quo'. This led to a discussion of the term 'radical'. ZM explains:

> I'm OK being considered 'radical' because I openly link my ideas and values to Marxism, which is considered *radical*, anyway. So, all I'm doing is really following on in an established critical tradition.

In terms of TR's value, ZM supported CG's view that it offers a 'lens', or 'a foil for a discussion to say that if we want change, we need to, yes, learn from what we've been through, but not be tempered to the extent that we don't push forward'.

However, ZM also acknowledged the risk of being perceived as a radical and 'putting your head above the parapet'. He recognises that questioning aspects of the status quo, particularly when certain values and practices seem to be considered 'common sense' (Gramsci 1971) can be seen as pugnacious or even 'trouble-making'. In contrast to CG and ZM, MG and VN had come to the project from the basis of a pre-existing interest in the concept of TR and saw it differently. Both were very sensitive to the potential for marginalisation, and its dangers for the individual and the organisation. For MG, 'if people who have some power to influence within the structure of the university become marginalised, then nothing changes'. For her, TR captures the value of, and limitations on, small individual actions within larger structures. VN echoed this, highlighting MG's quotation from Sara Ahmed that 'When you expose a problem you pose a problem' (2017: 37), adding the following:

> If you are completely radical and you say 'this is the problem' then the attention turns on you, and then you're easily dismissed and in whatever form that takes. Then that radicalism becomes short lived.

Thus, for VN and MG, the overt radicalism championed by ZM and CG is not the most effective pathway to lasting and meaningful change.

For MG, tempered radicalism as a concept appeals strongly and was something she 'had been looking for' before she discovered Meyerson's work. She also reflected how the word *radical* is commonly used to marginalise 'particular ideas', 'many of which . . . I wouldn't see as particularly radical. I would see as generally humanitarian or kind or totally normal desirable human behaviour'.

She felt VN gave a concrete example of this, whereby simply 'asking for what she needed' to address a situation in which she faced gender discrimination, marked her out as troublesome and therefore 'radical'. For VN as for MG, TR describes a set of successful strategies for change in the face of this risk. VN offered another perspective, suggesting the following:

> It gives an identity to find others like you. Like, we found each other, and I think it's helpful to know that others have these struggles. . . . So, for me, I think tempered radicalism is useful because it names something.

Finally, FS's understanding of Meyerson's thinking provides a potential point of connection between the group's different perspectives:

> One of the things she helps me with is the shades of radicalism and the presentations of radicalism. And I think [Meyerson] is trying to get to the point that there isn't a right way to do this . . . it's the motivation that sits underneath it that you need to connect with.

For FS, this connects to her own particular set of values:

> I think my only motivation, the only thing that has ever really driven me is a care and concern for others. If that's where my radicalism sits then I'm OK with it because it means that I've done things for the right reason.

Clearly, our perspectives on the meaning of tempered radicalism were disparate and – for CG and ZM – its utility in question. To them, both 'tempered' and 'radical' presented as ambiguous, with their combination raising even more questions. Despite the lack of consensus, it does seem that being able to name it, might draw individuals towards it and could, as MG suggested, create the space for a collective endeavour. CG shared this view, noting that this notion might serve as a conceptual vehicle through

which to channel and focus our collective congruities. ZM agreed but harbours the worry that if 'tempered' is understood as pertaining to a reduction in intensity or conviction, any progressive movement will stall due to the seismic change required, to save higher education from the socioeconomic policy pressures that are shaping our current realities. Despite our differences in understanding the term of tempered radicalism, we nevertheless seemed to broadly agree when reflecting on our past actions and deciding if these actions could be considered as those of a tempered radical (explored further in Section 3).The juxtaposition of on the one hand agreeing on tempered radical actions yet on the other hand, having different perspectives on the theoretical notion of tempered radicalism is likely to connect to our individual identities.

Threading through the conversation was a theme concerned with how we see ourselves and our own identities both in idealistic terms, and as a pragmatic reality in which we concede that identities are fluid and often pluralistic. Meyerson and Scully (1995: 587) noted the following:

> In the tempered radical, both the professional and the personal identities are strong and salient; they do not appear alternately for special situations. In most situations, the pull of each identity only makes the opposite identity all the more apparent, threatened, and painful.

In the light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that there was no clear consensus on our understanding of the term. The topic of academic identities is centred in the next section in relation to different kinds of universities and our own roles as well as the impact these have on our own sense of agency.

Voicing tempered radicalism in the context of academic identities, positionalities and agentic practices

Mark Barrow and colleagues suggest that 'the rapid and wide-ranging structural, financial and ideological changes occurring within the Western academy (and beyond)' have left individuals struggling to define themselves and their responses to what is happening around them (2020: 140). The notions of self-definition and academic identity are central to our discussions around tempered radicalism, because of the clear formative impact of societal, institutional and economic pressures. Thus understood,

identity formation is a complex, 'socially negotiated' process (Collins et al. 2020: 205). At its core is the definition of self in the context of others, occupational or organisational. Furthermore, academic identity is 'forged within and by social resources' (Barrow et al. 2020: 240). The ideas of perceived self-identity and positionality emerged strongly from our autoethnographic data. We acknowledged self-identity, formative forces for identity – including the potential for this to be pluralistic – and the impact of our social and institutional identities on our practices and relative radicality. The socially negotiated nature of identity and the potential for action is at the heart of tempered radicalism.

In 2008, Sue Clegg (2008: 329) examined academic identity and that which threatened agency, not least the pressures of performativity in the neoliberal, market-driven university. Her data spoke to the capacity and readiness of academics to exercise what she called 'principled autonomy and agency'. Writing in a similar period, Richard Winter's (2009) analysis differed significantly. He described a schism regarding values-fit, arguing that for some individuals there is an alignment of both ideologies and values, while for others this is not the case. He used two terms to describe the two scenarios – the academic manager (where there is a congruence) and the managed academic (where there is not). Winter (2009: 121) explains:

> Academic managers have internalised values and constructed goals and working patterns that reflect the imperatives of a corporate management system, such as strong hierarchical management, budgetary control, income maximisation, commercialisation and performance management indicators.

In contrast:

> Managed academics have defended and promoted distinctive accounts of their own professional identity and that of the institution by invoking values of self-regulation, collegial practice and educational standards.

While it is hard to dispute Winter's (2009: 128) argument that there needs to be a reconciliation between the two 'identity claims', his proposed solutions seem to be managed by the university rather than generated by the individuals and communities which constitute it. Moreover, the solutions do not address whether higher education may have lost its way and whether academics working through their identities as a source of resistance can and

should question it, rather than find a way to fit in, or be fitted in. Michael Lust and colleagues (2019) for example, writing from a German perspective, cite Hirschman (1970) who suggested that actors in the face of adversity have three agentic choices – exit, voice and loyalty. Tempered radicalism is about choosing voice. Reflecting our diverse interpretations of the term itself, our work highlighted the ways in which what such voice means is contingent on a variety of contextual factors.

A hugely significant part of this context is the particular university in which an individual finds themselves. This is felt particularly by CG and ZM. For ZM:

> It's easier to conceive of one of the ancients, for example [such as St Andrews, Edinburgh and Oxford etc.], as being the archetype of the 'university for public good' because much of their activity can appear (externally, at least) to evade the pressures of the neoliberal training-focussed, employability agenda, for example.

ZM contrasted this with universities 'based around the professions' whose focus is on graduate employment and entrepreneurship at the risk of neglecting criticality. Both CG and MG acknowledge the question of institutional privilege, its manifestations and impact on the self. The dynamics of this can elude resolution. For example, CG reflects on finding the experience of prior employment in a Russell Group institution (a group of research-intensive UK universities self-styled as elite) as 'totally alienating'. Yet he also reflected on 'feeling like a stranger' in his current university despite being much more aligned with its aims. While feeling the culture of his present institution to be more congruent with his values, CG did not like being pigeon-holed or labelled as an 'academic developer', seeing himself as an academic who teaches and researches.

This discussion of the nature of different universities foregrounded the often-unresolvable nature of the tension inherent in being employed by an organisation, whilst disagreeing with aspects of its activities. Tempered radicalism encourages us to consider different aspects of where individuals sit in relation to institutional structures and hierarchies. In CG's words, the tempering of radical ideas happens because 'we have to adapt to and conform within'. Such conflict between an individual and their organisation is captured by Stormer and Devine (2008) who found academics embracing 'facades of conformity' when confronted with conflict or incongruity

between individual values and the institutions. ZM also draws attention to the fact ‘you’re so limited in what you can say’ or else ‘self-regulate’, and that this is particularly acute for staff who are ‘on the periphery’ – for example, through occupying a junior role or a temporary contract. FS represents the pull to normativity with the insistent militariness of the drumbeat in her poem (written as her contribution during the first step of data collection), much of which is written in the imperative, as a set of instructions to follow. Before the poem asks ‘Do I lead?/ Do I follow?’ it first asks ‘Who am I? / What am I?’, making a deep connection between resistance and personal identity and self-understanding. FS reflects:

> I’ve had quite senior posts, so I have been part of a system that has probably silenced people, without intending to. So, I think I am that banger of the drum, but I’m not sure what song I’ve been playing. I don’t think it was my tune, but I think I picked it up and I think I then carried on banging.

FS notes that criticality can be difficult because ‘I am part of [the institution]. I can’t separate myself easily from it’. While ZM talks about the identities of university and individual as discrete, FS’s perspective challenges the possibility of separation, given her (or potentially any individual’s) positioning in institutional structures and hierarchies.

Three of us cited experiences which foregrounded the relationship between the ability to effect change and seniority. MG recounted an example of how someone in a senior position had used their position to block an initiative, reflecting the fact that the more junior the academic position, the more difficult it can be to make change. Notwithstanding this common experience, for VN, despite her extremely junior position as a doctoral researcher, changes were possible but only because of the use of university charter marks for gender equality (Athena Swan) and race equality:

> You know, Athena Swan, the Race Equality Charter, . . . these are structures which the university buys into and that has been the only way which I’ve been able to try to make some difference.

This theme of consciousness of the limitations of one’s own agency also related to each individual’s position. Relating to employment, ZM openly acknowledged that a permanent contract afforded him certain privileges

that allow him to speak. When he had been in a position of short-term fixed contracts, out of necessity, he had to be more tempered. MG built on this, referring to her experience of how the combination of precarious contracts and pregnancy can diminish women's careers and subsequently their voices in the institution. Similarly, VN described 'the power imbalance in the [PhD supervisory] relationship' as 'huge', increasing the perceived risk of speaking out on any issue. She drew attention to the impact of positionality in terms of both gender and institutional role.

Instead of clear answers, the discussion highlighted themes of positionality, hierarchy, and internal and external conflicts. VN connected positionality and academic identity together with a personal inner tension:

> I realised there must be a part of me that's actively selecting not to see things because I just can't cope. I need to still function . . . you need to stay in the system in order to make any changes. And I think for me that's the real tension because if it becomes too much, you leave and nothing changes.

Deborah Churchman and Sharron King explore sense-making in academic roles and the hidden stories which offer insight into academic identity. They suggest that in some cases standardising academic practices can result in numerous agentic actions including 'the withdrawal of intellectual labour' and 'a lack of ownership of and commitment to . . . work practices' (2009: 515). Echoing Winter (2009), they highlight the value of creating spaces 'where the multiple stories can resonate, grow and sustain identities' (2009: 515). They add that these communal sites might also be places of 'resistance, collegiality, sustenance and innovation' (2009: 515). Such internal conflict, influenced in part by the divergence of one's identity and values with that portrayed by and/or enacted by an institution, may then lead to ideological tension or be further catalysed or influenced by existing ideological tensions. ZM echoed John Holmwood (2014) in pointing out that higher education institutions are places where of inequality is perpetuated, which stands in contrast to their potential to be at the heart of societal and economic reform. ZM believes that such reform ought to be at the core of universities' very raison d'être.

The experience of conflict and being conflicted is present in MG's initial response in the conversation to the question of what tempered radicalism means. She saw it as far-reaching:

> Can we ever step outside that temperedness? As soon as we're outside our own heads and engaging with other people we have to negotiate other views and difference, other perspectives. Can we step outside of it at all?

She elaborates:

> where are the doors that will open? Where are the doors that are only going to close more firmly if I push. And it describes that tension that we all, I think, have to live with whether we like it or not really.

MG's words speak to an inner conversation wherein questions are posed to the self in terms of one's own agency. MG felt that the term 'tempered radicalism' echoed an internal ongoing discourse, evaluating one's personal agency in the context of one's role and position within the organisation. While she empathises with CG's 'struggle to channel [his] radicalism' and a 'disillusionment with everything', it is something she resists in order to stay focussed on action. MG shifts the focus away from our consideration of identity and positionality, and on to how we choose (not) to act upon our deliberations, which provides a bridge to the final theme of our analysis.

Choice and action

In discussing what tempered radicalism means to us, we shared previous experiences that could be interpreted as tempered radicalism. In this section, we explore some of the situations we were in, what choices were available to us, and what actions we chose to take. Connected with the five characteristics of tempered radicalism mentioned in the introduction, the important goal is also identified, alongside the constraints as well as final outcomes. Our examples of action, explored in this article, led us to concluding thoughts about what (tempered) radicalism is in contemporary higher education.

For VN, the need to remain within the system and be positioned within the organisational eco-system meant that she chose to accept funding for an additional year to continue her PhD as an outcome of a formal complaint. In a sense this was a compromise, but it also enabled her to help others, by raising awareness of postgraduates' rights and ensuring this fed into future race equality policy at her university. Her tempered approach required an understanding of identity and change which is collective, rather than in-

dividual. In her context, she recognised that her poor treatment was not an isolated incident and therefore as part of the settlement, the university agreed to provide a clear complaints process, which had been unavailable to her.

CG used his position as Programme Leader to lead a significant revision of a Postgraduate Certificate for academic staff in moving away from the hitherto normative focus of the course incorporating traditional educational theory and content to introduce more of an explicit critical focus. CG introduced key critical theory topics and literature to present a critical perspective on higher education, notably its present neoliberal context and narrow employability focus, which can obscure broader learning and criticality development. This change sought to encourage early career academics to critically reflect upon, question and potentially take action in relation to the context in which they work.

For MG, her tempered radical actions took place in the context of awareness that there were certain staff and students who were favoured above others – for example, in access to development or promotion opportunities. One possible choice was to accept that this was how the workplace culture was and to simply accept it. Instead, the action she took on an ongoing basis was to frame discussion and action in such a way as to draw attention to the full range of people affected by given policies. She has also been successful in using diversity as a lens for developing learning and teaching practice. These actions connect to tempered radicals' focus on important goals – in this case, ensuring equity in institutional policies and processes.

For ZM, the situation was that he was dissatisfied with existing assessment procedures that placed emphasis on employment outcomes through a focus on grading and an external assessment. The choices he had available to him were to simply accept the assessment that had been in place and make no changes, or alternatively to make changes which were more in line with his own viewpoint that universities should be more focussed on the intrinsic value of education rather than on chasing employment outcomes. For ZM, the important goal was to empower students with their own learning. Although ZM was isolated in this position, nevertheless through strong social support networks, he was able to instigate changes despite the dominant narrative within music education being to prepare students for employment. As such, this action constitutes tempered radical action because he has encouraged experimentation and stimulated deep professional conversations with his colleagues.

While these examples may convey the sense that the individuals carrying out these actions were fully cognisant of such actions being a tempered radical approach, FS clearly shows that such actions are often carried out without necessarily considering whether such actions were either radical or tempered. As she explains, FS chose to lead a professional community in order to make it less exclusive and turn it into a more inclusive and welcoming space to a variety of people. This came from her drive to care for others, which she describes as her chief motivation. She says:

> So, my radicalism – if it's ever been there – has probably been not a loud banging on the drum, but a persistent, annoying banging noise in people's ears.

However, CG offered FS a different interpretation, based on the impact of her work:

> What you did with that to me was very much as a tempered radical. You took something and you made it better, . . . for the people who needed it and it provided . . . a far more comfortable and welcoming space for me than it was before. . . . I don't know how deliberate it was, but there's a radical element here.

ZM contends:

> In what way is that tempered then? . . . Because it feels to me that if someone is literally, through their involvement in a situation, changing the environment or landscape. . . . In what way is that 'tempered'?

In relation to this and other examples of FS's actions, CG echoed ZM's view:

> Unfortunately, that is radical. In the society we live in, the way I see it is just having that mission of working to help others is seen as radical, you know?

While FS feels it is 'sad that that's radical', MG offered an observation on individual versus collective conceptualisations of radicalism, highlighting that FS's project was 'clearly a collective endeavour, and . . . what you were doing is creating spaces for people'. She contrasts this with the language of individualism often used to describe such actions. She suggests that the

idea of the radical as a lone figure tends to be embedded in our thinking, and challenges this:

> All these images, like . . . sticking your head over a parapet . . . that's exposing yourself individually, isn't it? And I wonder whether 'radical' means actually something rather different?

Our discussions suggest that a narrative of tempered radicalism confined to individual acts and decisions would be limiting and potentially dangerous if people marginalised themselves within organisations. It would also fail to explore processes of building the collective will and momentum without which change will not occur. Meyerson and Scully (1995) describe tempered radicals as having a bias towards action. The idea of 'tempering' relates to managing values and beliefs in the context of social relationships – including hierarchies, and institutions where incongruities may exist (Stormer and Devine 2008). It thus intrinsically recognises the social construction of identity and is a model that configures the individual tempered radical as consciously making the decisions needed to navigate their social and professional/academic world. Notably, all the concrete examples of action we shared earlier and elsewhere in the article had a social dimension, whether engaging with students or university committees; reorienting the culture of a professional community to be more welcoming and inclusive; altering or undermining power-relations to further democratise pedagogic interactions; or pushing forward a change initiative in the knowledge that it is likely to cause discomfort.

Concluding thoughts

While tempered radicals exist in all organisations, academics are trained and habituated critical thinkers, alert to problems and contradictions in our working environments. Therefore many of us find ourselves concerned with exploring what it means to bring a values-based criticality to our work in twenty-first century higher education. Tempered radicalism has offered the authors, as a group, a means to explore how we as individuals with different experiences and positionalities, find ways in which to navigate the limitations imposed by social and professional contexts and structures on our ability to act according to our values. As a group of researchers, we

found we brought a range of different interpretations, lived experiences and theoretical frameworks to the idea of tempered radicalism. Yet we were also each able point to one or more particular incident from our experience that played a significant role in shaping our respective understandings of what tempered radicalism might mean. Thus, tempered radicalism enabled us to anchor our discussion on the theme of resisting dominant narratives with which we find ourselves at odds, in different ways.

What emerged from an analysis of these differences is that, although we all broadly understand tempered radicalism according to the five characteristics mentioned in the introduction, we nevertheless all interpret it differently when it comes to our own individual actions, as what is tempered and radical for one person, is not for another. However, using language and ideas presented to us by Meyerson and Scully (1995), we can conceive of a series of questions which are useful to pose as we explore this concept. For example, we have found it important to question our positionality and ask 'how do gender, race, social background, institutional role and contractual status influence an individual's personal understanding and framing of tempered radicalism?'. Similarly, it is important to ask, considering such positionality, 'how strong is the individual's "bias to action", and what kind of actions are they (able and) likely to take in relation to their drive to critique situations and structures?'

There was clearly an ideological split amongst the authors with some more ready to align with tempered radicalism and some for whom this provided a potential barrier to the type of overt radicalism they deemed necessary to combat many of the issues impacting on the type of higher education that we want to see and participate in. Although initially difficult to reconcile, through calling for a reconsideration of our use of the term, we began to understand this as a dynamic relationship whereby it was possible to occupy multiple positions depending on the complex nature of the various situations in which we find ourselves. The breadth of Meyerson and Scully's concept is in this sense a strength, emphasising commonality rather than difference, and creating the conditions for collaboration. Therefore, we conclude, it has possible value in supporting more collective approaches to radical endeavours with an enhanced potential for success and less individual risk.

At the time of writing this article, **Marita Grimwood** was Associate Professor at Edinburgh Napier University. She holds a PhD in English literature and is the author of *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007). With extensive educational development experience in both employment and consultancy, she has published articles and resources on topics ranging from curriculum internationalisation and decolonisation to project supervision. She is currently completing the manuscript of a book which offers a critical approach to evidencing teaching achievements. She works for Advance HE as Senior Advisor for teaching fellowships. She writes in a personal capacity.

Vani Naik is completing a PhD on the lack of women engineering professors in the United Kingdom, and uses the knowledge and expertise developed through this research in her role as Researcher Developer at Edinburgh Napier University. Following a career in English language teaching, her interest in critical approaches has evolved from critical discourse analysis to critical management more broadly. Her PhD takes a feminist critical management and critical realist perspective. She translates the knowledge from these theoretical approaches into fostering a better experience for doctoral researchers in her role as Researcher Developer.

Cameron Graham is Associate Professor at Edinburgh Napier University where he leads on the implementation of a new curriculum framework and the University's Fellowship scheme. Cameron's research interests relate to criticality in the academy with a focus on scope of critical thinking, its conceptualisation and how this translates into the curriculum. His doctoral research explored international master's students' experiences at three UK universities focusing on their conceptualisation, development and application of criticality and adaption to their new contexts of learning. This research highlighted 'contexts of difference' as a key means through which students develop as critical persons.

Zack Moir is an Associate Professor of Music at Edinburgh Napier University. His research interests are in popular music in higher education, social justice, and composition/improvisation pedagogy. Zack's books include *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Education*, *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music Education*, and

Action Based Approaches in Popular Music Education (2021). Forthcoming books include *Improvisation as Liberatory Praxis in Popular Music Education* (OUP), and *Popular Music Education for Critical Consciousness: An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (Intellect). Zack is the Chair of the International Society for Music Education Popular Music Education Group and is on the Board of Directors of the Association for Popular Music Education.

Fiona Smart is an independent learning and teaching enhancement consultant working in the United Kingdom and internationally, following a career as a nurse registrant – adult and child – and in higher education from 1995 to 2021. As a consultant, Fiona supports and drives strategic change which results in demonstrable impact. She has a particular interest in curriculum design, assessment and feedback, the potential of dialogic approaches in professional recognition and arts-based pedagogy.

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