VOICES IN ACADEMIA AND BEYOND: AN EXPLORATION OF EUROPEAN RESEARCHERS' NARRATIVES USING A DECOLONISING LENS

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Abstract

Grounded in the well-known feminist slogan coined by Carol Hanisch in 1970, "the personal is political," and informed by the postcolonial decolonising perspective, this article underlines the significance of foregrounding authentic lived experiences, challenging purportedly 'neutral' and 'objectivist' positivist assumptions. Featuring strong representation of women researchers and individuals of minority backgrounds among our

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respondents, both within and beyond academia, the article's discussion is informed by a qualitative autobiographical comparative inquiry that deploys the intersectional perspective. The study (i) profiled 'Early Career Researchers' (ECRs) to demystify 'public-private divide' conventions, while critically questioning the ECR category's definition; and (ii) queried disparities and resistances at play with respect to (de)colonising higher education, research, and innovation (HERI) contexts. The findings include narrative insights from 36 participants of the COST Action CA20137 *Making Young Researchers' Voices Heard for Gender Equality (VOICES)* network, which includes 480 members, based across Europe. Findings resulting from the thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data critically chronicle (i) the heterogeneity in terms of researchers' institutionalised categorisations, and (ii) salient intersections such as age range, gender, nationality, country of residence, race, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic group. The discussion critically complements existing monitoring and evaluative knowledge-bases (particularly quantitative), with a nuanced discernment of personal experiences; it thus provides valuable insights into the precarious (in)visibility(/-ies) of ECRs that connect the personal, public, and political realms. The discussion concludes with recommendations for monitoring and evaluation policies and practices to foster the mitigation of disparities, invisibilities, and under- and misrepresentations of ECRs.

Keywords: cross-country comparative research, decolonisation, early career researchers (ECRs), feminist narrative research, gender representation, intersectionality

Introduction

Feminist research aims to understand and improve women's lives. One way to conceptualise feminism is as an empowering discourse that promotes critical consciousness and resistance to prevailing social norms (Holmes & Marra, 2010). Narrative research in the

social sciences has emerged as a powerful qualitative method for understanding human experiences, as it provides a means of incorporating discursive aspects.

Grounded in the well-known feminist slogan coined by Carol Hanisch in 1970, "the personal is political," and informed by the postcolonial decolonising perspective, this article underlines the significance of foregrounding authentic lived experiences, challenging purportedly 'neutral' and 'objectivist' positivist assumptions. Featuring a strong representation of women researchers and individuals from minority backgrounds, both within and beyond academia, the article's discussion is informed by a qualitative autobiographical comparative inquiry that deploys the intersectional perspective. The study (i) profiled 'Early Career Researchers' (ECRs) to demystify 'public-private divide' conventions, while critically interrogating the term; and (ii) queried disparities and resistances at play with respect to (de)colonising higher education, research, and innovation (HERI) contexts. The findings give voice to 36 participants of the COST Action CA20137 *Making Young Researchers' Voices Heard for Gender Equality (VOICES)* network, based in different European countries. Findings resulting from the thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data critically chronicle (i) the heterogeneity among researchers' institutionalised categorisations, and (ii) salient intersections such as age range, gender, nationality, country of residence, race, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic group. The term 'early career researchers' (with its suggestion of an intermediary phase)

requires critical rethinking, since the category increasingly includes includes people who are in that position long-term, caught up in a series of short-term insecure contracts (Menard & Shinton, 2022; Spina et al., 2022). These circumstances lead to a significant proportion of so-called early career researchers being over 40 years old, a result of casualisation and mobility challenges.

The discussion on the findings of our study (below) critically complements existing monitoring and evaluation knowledge-bases (which tend to be quantitative) with a nuanced discernment of personal experiences, providing valuable insights into the precarious (in)visibility(/-ies) of ECRs that connect the personal, public, and political realms. Based on personal trajectories of researchers, this article aims to offer insights into the diverse experiences of researchers within academia and beyond, thereby contributing towards decolonisation and intersectional analysis. As a process of transformation, decolonisation aims to confront and reduce colonial legacies that are still present in academic research, research methods, gendered practices, and institutional frameworks. The process of decolonisation should be perceived as a path toward "recovery," rather than an effort to "reverse" the impacts of colonialism (Dixon, 2020). Deconstructing Eurocentric viewpoints and epistemologies is a key component of decolonising academia (Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In order to incorporate varied voices and perspectives that have historically been ignored by colonial education systems, it is imperative to ensure the inclusion of a wide range of

perspectives and lived experiences to reveal "the unseen norms that shape universities into establishments that regard specific bodies (white, male) as the standard, turning the 'others' into 'space invaders', bodies that are out of place" (De Jong et al., 2017). While existing research has addressed the intersection of academia, precariousness, and gender (e.g. Primack et al., 2010; Zheng, 2018; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Ivancheva et al., 2019; Murgia & Poggio, 2019; Bonello & Wånggren, 2023; Rowell & Morris, 2023), there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the utilisation of a narrative approach, when it comes to researchers in Europe. With a few exceptions (e.g. Krilić et al., 2019), studies of researchers in European countries have tended to focus on one particular country (e.g. O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Lopes et al., 2023), rather than taking a wider comparative approach. This study seeks to bridge this gap by employing a narrative inquiry to uncover nuanced insights into women's experiences within academia and beyond across Europe, and the underlying structures that influence them. By adopting a narrative lens, our research aspires to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of academic precariousness and to inform strategies for fostering inclusivity and equity within educational institutions.

The following section provides the literature review by highlighting the significance of narratives, and emphasising the distinct contributions of feminist narrative research in uncovering intersectional dimensions and the impacts of colonisation. Afterward, there is the methodology section, followed by the analysis of data and subsequent discussions.

Literature Review

Within the domain of qualitative methodologies, feminist narrative research has gained prominence for its dynamic approach to understanding the nuanced dimensions of gendered experiences through storytelling (Smith, 2005). A narrative is a description of events occurring over time in which individuals arrange and interpret their experiences (Bruner, 1991). Narrative is a way of knowing (Kramp, 2003) because it is a valuable source of empirical knowledge (Bruce et al., 2016). Feminist narrative research is an important tool for understanding and potentially improving the lives of self-identified women (Woodiwiss et al., 2017) as it values women's voices and the stories they tell. Consequently, scholars emphasise the importance of narrative research in challenging conventional power structures, amplifying marginalised voices, and opening avenues for those who have been historically marginalised or silenced (Riessman, 2008).

Although it has been argued that initiating narrative research can be nonlinear and frequently messy (Bruce et al., 2016), there is a growing body of research on the methods and rationale behind narrative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Fraser & MacDougall, 2017; Andrews et al., 2013). Feminist narrative research, rooted in feminist principles, employs diverse qualitative methodologies that prioritise individual stories as transformative tools for empowerment and societal change (Chase, 2016). Narrative inquiry forms the core of feminist narrative research, offering a

systematic and interpretive framework for exploring the ways individuals construct and communicate their stories (Riessman, 2008). Narratives are not mere chronological accounts but are socially and culturally embedded, embodied and situated, allowing researchers to unpack the intricate interplay of gendered experiences, and exploring how individuals negotiate, resist, and internalise societal norms through their narrative expressions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Moreover, it is also important to embrace diverse voices and experiences to ensure inclusivity and explore intersectional analysis (Fine, 2019; Mountz et al., 2015).

The concept of intersectionality, originally introduced by Crenshaw (1991), urges us to move beyond simplistic analyses of gender and consider the intersections of various social categories, including race, class, sexuality, age, religion, nationality, parenthood and disability (Showunmi, 2020; Collins et al., 2021). This is in line with what Zheng (2018, p. 247) identifies as a key "feminist principle": "organizing from the margins, that is, prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable and multiply disadvantaged." Similarly, in decolonial discourse, feminist scholars promote intersectional analyses that acknowledge the relationship between colonialism, race, and gender (Hooks, 1984). Decolonising gender practices entails acknowledging suppressed voices and knowledge systems, amplifying heterogeneity, and challenging colonial constructions of femininity and masculinity. To address systemic injustices and power imbalances, decolonisation also requires structural changes within institutional frameworks (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Examining intersectionality through a decolonial lens

involves employing a theoretical framework of decolonisation, which considers various aspects such as masculinism, hegemonic beliefs, white supremacy, global hierarchies, oppression, power imbalances, democratisation, inclusion, politics of knowledge, and coloniality, among others. It is essential to recognise that most components of identity are not static or historically inherent but rather constructs of colonialism. Additionally, oppression extends beyond individual experiences to encompass communities and institutional structures (Sims, 2023).

There is a dimension of "collaborative autoethnography" (Chang et al., 2016) to this research, where a group of researchers shared their experiential accounts in an attempt to capture some of the complexity and intersections at play within the structures of the neoliberal academy. Collaborative autoethnography has the capacity to "mak[e] the familiar strange" (Rowell & Morris, 2023, p. 33), critically denaturalising the structures within which we work. Our awareness of our own dual positioning as research subjects as well as researchers was accompanied by critical and reflective distancing, as our anonymised experiences were shared, collaboratively analysed and discussed.

This article also seeks to contribute to the critical and nuanced identification of the gendered/intersectional (in)visibility of 'Early Career Researchers (ECRs)'[2] across different levels. The research environment shapes the "expectations or requirements placed on

[2] Definitions of 'ECR' have tended to be inconsistent.

ECRs" according to "disciplines and national contexts" (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2020, p. 263) and institutional culture. Studies show that so-called ECRs face significant challenges such as lack of resources and funding, pressure from senior researchers, insufficient mentoring and supervision, unbalanced work-life dynamics, and the pervasive and constant pressure to publish or perish (Friesenhahn & Beaudry, 2014; Levine & Rathmell, 2020; Termini & Traver, 2020). Moreover, precarious work seems to be widespread in academia, such as in Germany, where 90% of researchers employed in academia work on temporary contracts for a term of less than one year (Dirnagl, 2022). O'Keefe & Courtois (2019) explore the feminisation of precarious academic work in Ireland through the lens of 'non-citizenship' and 'non-status'. Academics who lack a permanent secure job labour (often ad hoc) under invisibility: as a group in terms of their institutional status, and individually, as lack of a coherent career trajectory results in a fragmented academic identity. The literature makes frequent reference to 'invisibility' (Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Bonello & Wånggren, 2023, p. 186). Mason & Megoran (2021) note that casualisation leads to dehumanisation in four ways: casualised staff are "invisible to colleagues and institutions"; they are vulnerable to exploitation; casualisation curtails their agency and academic freedom; and "it prevents them from articulating a long-term narrative of their careers that can provide meaning to their lives" (Mason & Megoran, 2021, p. 36). This latter is particularly pertinent in view of our chosen qualitative method, where we invite our respondents to tell their stories in their own words.

Our study focuses on the dynamics and challenges experienced by individuals, with a particular emphasis on the potential for decolonising higher education, research, and opening avenues for innovation and contextual reform. As decolonisation and gender dynamics collide, this reveals how colonialism repressed women's voices and upheld patriarchal systems (Mohanty, 1988). Neoliberalism and globalisation interact (Rizvi, 2007; Gyamera & Burke, 2018) in the neo-colonial context, which is itself enabled by and made up of "processes of domination" originating in European colonisation (Hickling-Hudson & Mayo, 2012, p. 2) and having "concrete effects on research practices" (Møller Madsen & Mählck, 2018, p. 8). Møller Madsen and Mählck call for more analysis of such research contexts, as the groundwork for generating strategies for decolonisation. "Decolonizing the mind" involves reimagining ways of knowing and constructing knowledge, to "disrupt the colonial gaze" and include marginalised ways of knowing (Tuitt & Stewart, 2021, pp. 106–107). Ultimately, decolonisation therefore also seeks to diversify knowledge itself, in contexts where structurally curtailed academic freedom threatens access to, production and voicing of, marginalised knowledge bases (Blell et al., 2022; Bonello & Wånggren, 2023, pp. 103, p. 273). Pereira (2017, p. 2) notes that a feminist approach has the capacity to "explore how academics demarcate the boundaries of 'proper' knowledge," with "academic practice [being] shaped by ongoing struggles over the definition of, and the power to define, what can count as 'proper' knowledge, and should therefore be accepted, funded or certified as such." In relation to these

boundaries, feminist scholarship (wherein we locate our study) may itself be a precariously positioned field of knowledge (Pereira, 2017, p. 2; Wånggren, 2018).

Within a 'globalised' academic market, precariously employed academics are frequently discouraged from setting down roots, with the perceived necessity or expectation of being able to relocate (sometimes to different countries) at short notice obstructing stability in geographical, institutional, and interpersonal terms (McAlpine, 2012). Personal circumstances, such as having children, may make such expectations of "international mobility" more challenging (Krilić et al., 2019, p. 167). While globalisation may seem to be universal and "ahistorical" (Rizvi, 2007), decolonisation draws our attention towards the particular and grounded. Decolonisation may also be embedded in day-to-day practice, affecting work-life balance. For example, Mountz et al. (2015) argue for a 'decolonising' approach to scholarship that incorporates care and "slowness," with added sensitivity to the relationship between work and life.

In terms of 'European' identity, Djerasimovic & Villani (2020, pp. 260-2) note that for most of their respondents, the "distinction between European and international/global" proved to be a "fuzzy" one. They observe that their interviewees' higher education institutions "seem to have largely become reliant on ECRs to be proactive in seeking and creating" networks and communities, rather than assuming responsibility for guidance and support of their ECRs. As a result, the ECRs they interviewed "seem to have

learnt not to identify with, or expect support from, their institutions." For some in Djerasimovic and Villani's study, this delocalisation (or "non-belonging," as Morris (2021) describes the everyday experiences of marginalisation in academia) led to embracing "European initiatives," which afforded "opportunities to find their place [and academic identities] within more broadly international communities, and a globalised research landscape." This however was not a straightforward 'European' academic identity: for most of their respondents, it did not translate into a sense of 'Europeanness' in their academic self" (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2020). A couple of the interviewees in Djerasimovic & Villani's study saw the "issue of 'Europeanness' in research policy as problematic, due to its possible misuse as a facet of Eurocentrism." The 'European' identity thus emerges as neither straightforward nor entirely uniform, sometimes provoking ambivalence. Decolonisation offers critical perspectives on Eurocentrism, by reminding us of what it tends to exclude.

Research Methodology

The research methodology applied to this study is based on the thematic analysis (Bamberg, 2012) of stories / experiences and biographies / backgrounds collected following the principles for surveys established by Groves et al. (2009). This qualitative approach involves the recording and documentation of stories or experiences from a target audience, with the aim of understanding both relevant events and phenomena (Lyons & Coyle, 2021).

Decolonisation of research involves recognising and giving space and voice to the heterogeneity that characterises academic researchers: there is heterogeneity and diversity between individuals (including this study's participants), as well as in terms of class, race, gender, disability, and other intersectional factors, which influence their access to opportunities and networks.

When collecting and generating the data necessary to conduct the qualitative inquiry, there are different methods that can be followed, such as interviews, workshops, or surveys, among others. In the case of this study, we decided that surveys (Groves et al., 2009) were the method that best fit our research. In this way, we could establish a structured questionnaire, which we could distribute electronically throughout our international and interdisciplinary network of researchers working in academia and beyond.

E-survey techniques make it possible to reach many people in various locations, without being limited by constraints of location or time. E-surveys, in contrast to in-person surveys, are computer-mediated communication methods with certain limitations and possibilities (Jamsen & Corley, 2007). The benefits from online surveys were felt to outweigh their drawbacks for the purposes of our study, since they enabled us to address sample variation, namely by reaching out to a group of 480 members, thus including diverse voices.

To develop the survey, we first established the scope and objective of our research through the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1.** What are the actual situations and experiences of researchers working in academia?
- **RQ2.** What main challenges do researchers face in academia from perspectives of intersecting factors such as gender, race, age, class, nationality, and employment conditions, among others?

Once the RQs were established, we drafted the survey questionnaire. To do this, we first included a series of demographic questions, such as age range, gender, nationality, country of residence, race, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic group, and whether the respondent has a disability. After this series of questions, we formulated a section related to the professional career, with questions such as number of years working in academia/research; field of research; current role; and type of contract (permanent, temporary, or other). Finally, we established a couple of questions in which we addressed the main objective of this study, i.e., open-text questions about the respondent's experience in relation to their search for a position in academia/research; transition in and towards academia (if relevant); the level of cooperation, competitiveness, or camaraderie perceived in academia/research; gender balance in this regard; the survey furthermore invited the respondent to share experiences that demystify the 'public-private divide'. It is crucial to emphasise that while certain inquiries within

the survey may touch upon sensitive topics, most questions were optional, and the design ensures complete anonymity of respondents and at no point were they asked to identify themselves.

After obtaining ethical approval, we distributed the final survey, consisting of a total of 22 questions (both quantitative and qualitative), through our network of researchers. We decided to leave data collection open for four months (October 2023 to February 2024) from the first call for participation. To produce a high-quality data code-set, the codes were identified using line-by-line analysis. In vivo coding was used, meaning that participant statements were taken as exact quotes, to remove language bias. Online meetings were initiated to negotiate reliability issues in qualitative analysis at every stage, ensuring harmony among the researchers in charge of data analysis. Furthermore, definitions of codes were carefully considered during coding to ensure that each code had an established meaning and to avoid "definitional drift" (Glesne, 2016, p. 198). This refers to the idea that a code should not have many meanings in different areas of the data.

Finally, to analyse the collected data, we followed an approach based on looking for patterns or themes that are repeated or highlighted within the collected data. Codes were assigned based on the research participants' own words, identifying common trends and repetitions. This is known as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2019), which we conducted by inputting the data in a

qualitative data in a specialised software (MAXQDA[3]).

Following the processing of codes and categories for each participant's responses with the help of the software, the themes were identified, which provided the basis for our detailed analysis, as shown and discussed in the following sections.

Data Analysis and Discussion

We have had a total of 36 participants, predominantly women aged between 31 and 50. 30 participants were female and 6 male. Among them, those from ITC countries[4] are prominent. Most participants fall within the middle-class bracket with 11-15 years of experience in academia, primarily within the field of social sciences. Of those who answered the question regarding the work, 10 were working in and 6 outside of academia. Employment positions vary, with resident and temporary contracts being more or less equally represented (14 and 12 respectively).

Our findings span a wide range of topics, including: system, power and hierarchy; power structures and the global south; decolonising knowledge; public-private distortions; and agency and resistance, as will be discussed below.

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[3] https://www.maxqda.com/

[4] ITC means Inclusiveness Target Countries which is a geographical categorisation of COST member countries. The current list of ITCs include: Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Republic of North Macedonia, Republic of Serbia, Türkiye, and Ukraine (EU COST, 2024).

System, Power, and Hierarchy

The findings of this research provide insights into the complex relationships between gender, hierarchy, and power within the academic world and beyond. The dataset includes assessments of "the existing scientific system" as being "characterised by a hierarchical structure of universities and scientific institutions and a lack of transparency," and therefore "not able to cope with intrigues," i.e., "a way of realising insecurity and uncertainty. Intrigue manifests itself in the mixing of scientific interests with tangible personal gain" (P36). This lack of transparency is a feature of the mystification of underground and structural dynamics, which is reported in management-heavy organisations where 'transparency' has been seen as "tend[ing] to run in one direction only, from the bottom of the organisation to the top but not the other way round" (Deem et al., 2007, p. 95). P8 in our study also bemoans the lack of transparency, and its implications for social justice: "A lack of transparency and an undervalue of achievement is still present, in my opinion, which we all need to work on in order to make it a more just ecosystem" (P8).

Gender disparities and power imbalances are sustained by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms in academic institutions. Participants expressed concerns over the prevalence of masculine ideas and voices being favoured over those of women. Several respondents noted that the academic hierarchy was structured along patriarchal lines:

I have also noticed that there remains a tendency to value men's voices and opinions more than women's … I personally have not experienced it yet, but from the colleagues I have been working on it is obvious how the system is still in favour of masculine ideas (P8).

Responses show situations in which young women are marginalised in academic settings because their male counterparts do not take them seriously. P13 observes that male managers in her country (an ITC country) may mistreat female employees with impunity: "Male managers in the country I live in can apply mobbing to women more easily" (P13). The same participant associates this with power relations in academia: "A male manager can easily shout at a female employee. This is how men can achieve dominance" (P13). Similarly, P8 notes that women in positions of power in academia still face more challenges than men in the same positions:

My supervisor is in her 60s and has been a vice-rector of the university for 12 years, and is the director of our research centre, and she is constantly undermined by the men in power and has to literally fight double as hard to sustain our work and positions (P8).

P31, who identifies as upper-class and who is in a high-responsibility role, nonetheless notes that her male colleagues had an easier time progressing through the ranks: "It was very difficult, raising a child and progressing in my career, but I certainly did go

(almost) to the top, with high responsibilities sometimes. My male colleagues certainly had a better career and were much more easy going!" (P31).

The patriarchal structure manifests in everyday interactions; and is nuanced with intersectionalities, such as those between gender and age cohort. In this regard, P32, who is precariously employed, testifies:

> I think in academia, you need to struggle on a daily basis as a young woman researcher. The mildest one you are facing every day is not being taken seriously. 'Adult' male researchers treat you like "you cute little thing tell me what you have done with your research" approach. For me it is one of the most annoying parts (P32).

Another testimony, volunteered by P12, substantiates that being short-changed in terms of professional treatment intersects with patriarchal perceptions of being a woman, and with senior colleagues' perceptions of younger colleagues:

> My advisor was the dean, he really had the idea that people in the university should look "presentable." After advising so many people... he thought that I did not get the message. One day he said, "Close the door, tomorrow you are going to be more presentable and wear a dress. While I am suggesting everyone to be presentable, you are undermining my authority." He had the impression I was

representing him and an object of his. The other time while I was helping him to check his emails, he said, "Even though I do have the secretary, it would be challenging for me to ask her to help me. The next day her husband may show up at the door to ask about. Is it OK with you since you are so young and single?" (P12).

P32 claims to have experienced sexual harassment from a colleague with seniority:

> by (the) vice dean of my faculty. Could not charge him for the assault as a woman professor told me not to do it. The reason behind this was they all think you are guilty; no one blames him because of what he had done to you" (P32).

The patriarchal structures here work to 'legitimate' and normalise harassment, placing the woman at a disadvantage. It is notable that P32 found a lack of support and solidarity from other women, who were integrated into the system. A major theme that exacerbates power disparities and inequalities among early career researchers (so-called ECRs) seems to be precarity. Precarity can be defined as a condition characterised by uncertainty, instability, and vulnerability in various aspects of individuals' lives, such as employment, housing, and social welfare (Millar, 2017; Standing, 2011). Sexual harassment is an issue in higher education institutions, where intersectionally marginalised persons are most at risk (see the article by Cutajar & Vassallo (2024), in this volume, on sexual harassment at an EU university), and employment

precarity is a factor that has been found to increase the likelihood of sexual harassment at work (Wånggren, 2023) as a result of unequal power relations. Precarity in employment produced by neoliberal capitalism over the past decades around the world for financial gains causes "precarious life" (Butler, 2004; Bonello & Wånggren, 2023). For financial gain, academic neoliberal capitalism takes advantage of instability. Hence, addressing structural issues such as job insecurity is crucial for fostering safer and fairer work environments in academia.

Moreover, although some research has explored the growing sense of precariousness among academics (e.g. Lopes & Dewan, 2014; Allmer, 2018; Burton & Bowman, 2022; Bonello & Wånggren, 2023), the influence of the prevalent culture of precarious employment in academia on gender inequality warrants further exploration. P24, also in precarious employment in academia, likewise perceives that the difference in institutional status exacerbates the inequality, and adds that it creates administrative challenges:

> Tenured senior professors (in an ITC country) do not have to do anything and cannot be dismissed from the faculty. Their sole responsibility is to deliver lectures as scheduled. On the other hand, we, the younger generation, must conduct lectures, handle all administrative tasks (both our own and those of senior professors), find ways and time for research, secure financial resources, and more (P24).

In this account, the lack of institutional seniority is accompanied by job insecurity, which adds to the burdens of unpaid labour and disrupts work-life balance. P24 further notes that working in academia in her (ITC) country is "very challenging," and: "This is especially true for younger individuals, and particularly for women. Young teaching assistants often experience various forms of mistreatment from older professors" (P24). Institutional status, contractual status, age, and gender are seen as intersecting in ways that reinforce and maintain the hierarchy.

The dataset includes evidence of power structures producing precarity among many marginalised women academics as well as (so-called) ECRs, e.g., affecting postdocs in general (and, increasingly, irrespective of age and career stage, *contra* the implications of the term 'ECR'). Data that exemplify this include: "Most postdocs are completely disposable and can be dispensed with without much disruption of the university" (P9).

Power Structures and the Global South

While precarity comes across in the data as being built into the institutional culture, it is not the whole picture. Other data illuminate intersectional dynamics at play, and provide evidence that power structures map onto prior colonial legacies and postcolonial relations of dominance-marginalisation, impacting researchers with Global South nationalities or heritage. For example, the study participant born in an ex-colony in Asia explains her career progression in a European HERI:

I did not receive tenure because I was told that I was "a bad fit" after nearly 10 years there… The 10 years that I spent as a postdoc and then Assistant Professor without any stability and a low salary were emotionally draining. It also felt very random - there was no concrete basis for deciding "tenure" or not or "fit" (P11).

As the study sample was heterogeneous, some nationalities and languages emerged as less mainstreamed than others in the data. In this context, participants with less mainstream nationalities and language competences perceived themselves as less powerful; in the words of one respondent, this was because "I am constantly reminded about my accent (including by teachers who have told me that I make up words)" (P25).

Furthermore, adding age as one more intersecting category, the data provide even more evidence of intersectional dynamics at play. For instance, being over 40 years of age and having inadequate competency in the English language, and hailing from an ex-colony in South America, one can feel that being "over 40 I feel like I am always one step behind. [maybe] because my English is not good enough" (P25). This testifies to the perceived dominance of the English language, which marginalises other voices (and with them, knowledges); as Tandon et al. (2024, p. 297) note: 'The pervasiveness of the English language within academia hinders the possibility for multiple epistemologies to unfold to their full potential."

Our data suggests that while younger researchers feel vulnerable, older persons also experience vulnerability, particularly if they are not yet established. In general, being an ECR above 40 years of age seems to create additional pressure and challenges. Recently, the term and the definition of ECR or Early Career Researcher was modified by the EU to Young Researchers and Innovators (YRI), that is "a researcher or innovator under the age of 40" (EU COST, 2023). Prior to this, the term referred to a researcher within 8 years from the date of obtaining the PhD/doctorate (full-time equivalent) (EU COST, 2019). This revised definition poses challenges and runs counter to the European Union's lifelong learning objectives (known as EU 2020), potentially discouraging older citizens from pursuing a PhD. For example, the age barrier excludes many researchers from funding opportunities, including those who earned their PhDs after gaining industry experience and those who had career breaks because of societal requirements to fulfil traditional gender roles (usually female researchers). In addition, it also makes the transition to academia more difficult. A female researcher who has worked in the industry for several years also highlights this: "If you have worked in the industry for a long time …. and have a family, the transition to academia is nearly impossible…If you are young, single, and have the mobility to move to different universities and countries, you might have a successful career" (P29).

In this context, the data also suggest that women face additional vulnerabilities. For example, "When working in another country

the work life balance was less respected for me as a foreigner and being a woman" (P18) and "STEM fields are notoriously unfriendly to female, senior, social scientists from developing countries" (P2). Thus, not only being an immigrant, but also other intersecting vectors of discrimination – i.e. being of a particular age and gender with particular English language knowledge and skills – tend to make the experience of precarity likelier among ECRs.

The examples in this section illustrate how voices from the Global South are ignored or side-lined in academic discussions (a marginalisation that may be reinforced by gender and age), where certain knowledge systems are imposed on others by silencing and marginalising voices from the Global South within academic discourse (Spivak, 2004). Thus, power structures are multi-dimensional and discerning them requires a more nuanced approach, such as an intersectional perspective revealing the contexts wherein the power structures are embedded. Our data show that the primary experiential location of the power displays are social encounters and everyday conversations with one's fellow educators, and within the workplace. Additionally, the data can inform remapping 'the Global South' to include nationalities not always thus identified, in line with Piedalue and Rishi's (2017) insistence that a fixed geographic designation of the 'South' entrenches it (and any resulting research, policy and practice) in hierarchies of 'civility' or 'modernity' that perpetuate place-based and racialised inequalities. Consequently, a critical emancipatory engagement with the South cannot be bound to a fixed geographic designation of where the 'South' is.

Dislocation, Relocation, and Split Locations

Several topics related to 'location' emerge from the analysis. 'Location' in an academic setting is disclosed as losing (dis-locating) or changing (relocating) location, or operating in several distant locations, such mobility having both positive and less positive connotations for our respondents. Positive experiences of dis-/re-/split-location cover opportunities for desired geographical mobility, learning, networking through travelling, and career progression. For example, as P12 noted, "It feels good to be part of an international community, which gives a powerful biofeedback to me." Moreover, the EU funding made available for researchers' mobility, with the aim of strengthening international cooperation, also leads to expansion of networks and, in general, an increase in personal capabilities. For example, as P24 noted:

> COST has given me the opportunity to see the world for the first time, and to connect with other researchers. … That physical contact, experience exchange, and networking are some of the things that benefit us the most. I cannot achieve that from my office, sitting behind a laptop.

In addition to the personal satisfaction stemming from a rewarding sense of communality, the relocation can lead to success in applying for grants and entrenchment of career prospects. For example, P11 mentioned that she did her PhD "in the [non-

European country] and then moved to [an EU country] as a postdoc," and then she "received several large grants and then started my own group." Furthermore, P11 adds an account of successful career development, which, notably, connects with achieving job security and stability, thus making further relocation unnecessary. In her words, "2 years ago, I got a position as full Professor and head of department at another [EU country] university, and I now work here. This to me was a huge step forward also because I finally had a permanent position with a stable income."

In general, the location directly intersects with affiliation characteristics, which mean being based in a concrete research centre or department[5]. As P8 reported, "I have worked exclusively at research centres at the university and never in larger departments, which provided me throughout my PhD with the possibility to conduct my research freely, to be involved in European projects, and to travel." Again, particular characteristics of the location (here: a supportive academic environment inside bigger structures) directly predetermines the possibilities open to the researcher and, supposedly, access to future projects.

However, on the other hand, working in smaller departments located inside bigger academic structures may necessitate a broader job description that includes administrative duties (particularly when based in smaller institutions), adjusting one's

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[5] COST membership also requires affiliation, though this does not have to be in the form of a permanent post.

research interests to institutional agendas, the need to do 'ad hoc jobs' to make ends meet, or doing unpaid work. For example:

This has also involved a lot of extra work which my colleagues with doctoral positions at larger departments did not have to do, such as organising events, applying for research and travel grants to sustain the centre, administrative work and planning and organising of conferences (P8).

Also, a precariously employed study participant reported:

I have always worked in academia, with a few ad hoc jobs related to my field on the side. I have, however, aimed for a career in academia, and have built up my CV by working in several higher education institutions on fixed-term or hourly-paid contracts, and sometimes unpaid. ... I do a lot of unpaid work - I still scramble to build up my CV, though it is now so long it is unwieldy, and my research profile is all over the place (because I have had to take academic employment where I can find it, and keep doors to potential opportunity open). Yet I keep adding to the CV, just to be ready in case a permanent job I can apply for appears (P6).

Thus, the lack of a regular role, the recession from one's discipline, divergence from one's research interests or main academic focus, or a gap between research profile and job description are the less positive aspects of re-/dis-locations identified in the study. We term these disruptions 'role / discipline dislocations'.

Furthermore, split locations - for example, "I moved to a large MNC (multi-national company) (while I continued to supervise my PhD students at my academic position for free)" (P11) - pose a challenge to an ECR who strives to meet shifting requirements and survive in academia. P30 experienced movement between teaching jobs that was also geographical:

> In [a particular non-ITC EU country] you also have to be willing to move for a job. I have had jobs in 4 different cities (more than 100 kilometres apart) and that has been challenging. You get the choice to move or not but leaving 300 kilometres away from where you teach is not sustainable.

P30's negatively framed experience of instability and the necessity of continuous re-location, as she strove to adapt to the split/multiple locations, persisted for eight years before she finally got a permanent job.

Decolonising Knowledges: Efforts and Barriers

This research also allowed us to collect a variety of perspectives from researchers both within academia and beyond, helping toward decolonisation and intersectional analysis. Knowledge production by groups lacking a dominant voice is seen by some as precarious. P28 experiences her workplace environment and community as exclusionary, in their failure to understand, accept, or value the interaction between different knowledge bases: "my colleagues I work with seem to ignore my studies because they think I am doing something out of the field. In my working environment only ELT [English Language Teaching] studies are encouraged or appreciated" (P28). The disciplinary aspect may therefore be accompanied and reinforced by interpersonal dynamics. The experience of P8 also testifies to the exclusion that occurs because of power play and territoriality: "I saw how academic environments can turn into personal-vendetta battlegrounds where skills, knowledge and achievements are not valued" (P8).

In the same vein, with reference to gendered dynamics, P36 argues that the neglect of women's contributions affects the knowledge/research culture itself, and hinders structural change in the conditions of knowledge production: "Implementation of structural change initiated by women scientists in universities and scientific institutions remains a major challenge for the academic community" (P36). In P36's account, women trying to bring about change are not heard.

A male participant who is precariously employed in academia links the devaluing of knowledge production to one's career stage and institutional status: "Precarity is built into the structure of research and the downgrading of teaching allows institutions to distance themselves from the career development of postdocs as teaching is an existential function of universities" (P9).

One respondent (P36) experienced a more localised reversal of this, feeling that her international training was dismissed and belittled within the more bounded national context. She feels she was held back because established academics in her postcolonial country of residence (an ITC country) did not trust young researchers who had trained abroad in new fields of science: "Mistrust towards young scientists (even those who have graduated from world-renowned universities) is widespread in the scientific community of national countries" (P36). She explains this in terms of competition and defensive intergenerational dynamics, which translate to hostility in response to the perceived threat of competition from outside: "It seems that in their country nobody needs their skills and knowledge of new scientific fields acquired in advanced universities and topics proposed by them. Local scientists do not need additional competition" (P36).

She further adds that:

> distrust of young scientists lowers their self-confidence
> and reduces their motivation to work in science. It leads

to the loss of the 'frontier' knowledge they have gained in advanced universities, possible future discoveries and new technologies for the country and the prosperity of the whole society (P36).

P36 ultimately sees this therefore as a failure of international dialogue and exchange, as well as the loss of knowledge which occurs when global knowledge meets resistance in local contexts. It should be noted that this is a reversal of the more typical (colonial/neo-colonial) pattern, on the global stage, of local knowledge being overwritten, side-lined, or co-opted by globalised knowledge production (Smith, 1999). As a result, a cycle of lost opportunities is sustained when young scientists are discouraged from fully pursuing scientific endeavours and novel ideas due to a lack of trust. Thus, this response emphasises how crucial it is to create a climate of mutual respect and support among scientists so that young people feel empowered to share their special knowledge and insights, adding to knowledge production.

Public-Private Distortions

Work-life balance continues to be a critical point where researchers struggle. The results obtained show that life situations, such as having a child, pose a problem for those working in academia/research. Combining work and family responsibilities means that many academics do not find the time to create a family and those who do, face significant challenges that sometimes even lead them to withdraw from academia and

research for a time. This may add to the hurdles when it comes to resuming that professional life in the future.

The data analysis revealed how the public-private divide is undermined by the possibility of remote work and telework, the pace at which HERIs are operating, and the impact this has in terms of the demands and expectations placed on ECRs. It may seem that remote working could be a solution to this, but nothing could be further from the truth (Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022). While it is true that remote working may help to achieve a slightly better balance with family life, it has meant that having "the office" at home leads to not disconnecting from work, working more hours than one should, and even working during days off or vacation. "Spill-over from working to private lives" (Krilić et al., 2019, p. 173) is particularly intense in the "postdoctoral period" (Krilić et al., 2019, p. 169). The data below exemplifies this:

> I had no office on campus, so I would work from home and come in to deliver lectures. This meant even less of a boundary between my private life and work (P6).

> There is no work-life balance, only work-work-work balance. I am in a situation where I use my vacation leave to work on my own research (P6).

Personal and private spaces are here colonised by neoliberal pressures, which enlist the self (and the home) as a resource and an enterprise. A culture of overwork has been found to typify

academia across employment categories (Bonello & Wånggren, 2023, p. 101; Smith, 2024), though tending to have a higher impact on women (Acker & Armenti, 2004). Further analysis revealed that the dynamics, demands and expectations typically found in HERI contexts intersect with collateral circumstances and life events, such as bearing a child and becoming a parent. In this case the public-private divide is strategically reinterpreted by neoliberal institutions to justify precarious working conditions, dislocation, or exclusion:

> I was asked to go on unemployment each time I went on maternity leave, to avoid getting a permanent contract. I was clearly told that I could never make it in academia (P11).

> Balancing being a parent of small kids with being a group leader was extremely challenging (even for a man) (P9).

> You still have to choose between your personal life and your professional career, because such experiments… carried out by international groups in large scientific facilities such as accelerators (prominent research institutions in Europe)… cannot be extended. If you have interrupted your studies due to personal circumstances, you should start again (choose a new topic or change the field of study). There are no conditions to reconcile them (P36).

As a mother of two kids, it is difficult to create a balance between work and life......with the teaching load I am in, it is difficult to manage. I have been teaching 40 hours in a week for more than 600 students... And this 40 hour does not include preparing for teaching, grading, and putting numbers into the online system. I am also an advisor of two Ph.D. candidates, and a MA [Master's] student. So, there is no personal time at all. Basically, all of my time is divided by teaching, school related jobs, and home. Even though I would like to go to the gym or a social event, I do not have time (P12).

The above evidence from our study shows that the erosion of the public-private divide has been diverted from its intended feminist aims in the contexts under study, weaponised and deployed to side-line researchers with family responsibilities, in a way that reinforces patriarchal gender roles. It also distorts the boundaries between working and recreational hours and spaces to maximise researchers' and teachers' inputs and outputs.

Agency and Resistance: Conductors and Barriers

The postcolonial perspective supported the identification of dynamics and processes at play which decolonise established knowledge paradigms, production and validation, as well as the HERI systems, power structures and hierarchies described by participants. Agency is one such example. In the dataset, so-called ECRs referred to a few sources of agency, sometimes found in

solidarity with more senior colleagues, or their colleagues; and translating into attempts at centring or supporting younger, or otherwise marginalised, voices. For instance, networks and mentorship helped P15 navigate the academic structures: "I was lucky though that I did have a mentor, a professor from university, who helped me throughout the research ecosystem" (P15).

The testimony of P11 gives hope of light at the end of the tunnel, suggesting that, in the end, resilience and perseverance payoff:

> When my contract…ended at that job, I had also recently become a single mother to 3 kids under 5 (and then COVID hit some time later). It was a terrible period of my life, but an important stepping stone. Now, I head a department and am a full prof in another university in the same country. Sometimes, I still have trouble believing that I "made it!" But, having freedom from financial and job security is amazing, and allows me to focus on things other than fundraising at work, and I have peace of mind at home (P11).

However, P6, who is a precariously employed academic, noted that relationships within this hierarchical structure could be compromised by the constant "awareness of inequality," replacing the hoped-for true "collaboration" between peers:

> With regard to mentorship, I have been fortunate to experience collegiality from some senior colleagues, as well

as colleagues in similar precarious positions. However, I always feel that awareness of our inequality intrudes into the relationships with senior colleagues … One colleague on a precarious contract was a particular source of solidarity, but I have barely seen them since they got a permanent job. It is disheartening to realise that some relationships of solidarity are fragile; everyone in a precarious situation is competing… (P6).

P28 speaks of resentment from her colleagues because of the concessions made for her study:

Especially during my PhD period, I felt that English teachers around me got annoyed with me because every week I had to travel to another city to have my PhD classes and the school management had to give a day off in my schedule. For some people this is unfair because what I am studying is not directly related to language teaching (P28).

One participant exhibited a notable depth of insight and provided rich data reflecting about her experience of being singled out by colleagues as "different, not like others in the university of my country" (P36). She recalls telling one professor that she had been a researcher in a world-famous laboratory, she "was speechless when he told me, *'That means you do not know anything about this area of physics'*" (P36). She ascribes this to interpersonal dynamics, self-interest, and "personal gain": "I later found out that

he had tried to work in that field of physics, but he did not have the right training. He was forced to change fields" (P36).

In summary, agency and resistance in colonial contexts involve a dynamic interaction of different conductors and barriers that either support or impede colonised peoples' capacity to assert their autonomy and self-determination. These obstacles can be dealt with by taking into consideration the systemic gaps in the academic community. To fully comprehend the intricate dynamics of colonial power relations in academia and other research settings, one must have an extensive awareness of these components.

Conclusions

Foregrounding these voices in (and through) research is a step towards decolonisation, and some of our respondents are engaging in decolonisation efforts themselves, in their own research and their everyday interactions and practice. However, to achieve meaningful decolonisation, our study makes it clear that institutions must make commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and act upon them, in addition to reforming policies. Additionally, they have to actively interact with knowledge holders whose voices are not as often heard, furthering the recognition, validation, and inclusion of "diverse sources of knowledge" from outside formal higher education (UNESCO, 2021, p. 126), such as communities, Indigenous cultures, and civil society organisations.

The data shows the great imbalances that exist in the public-private life of those working in academia. This is mainly due to the significant workloads, since, as some respondents indicated, not only do they have to devote many hours to teaching per week, but the preparation for it consumes more time than those hours themselves. These tasks are carried out alongside many other obligations, such as developing their research (and research profiles, if not yet securely employed), supervising theses, and administrative procedures, among other things. Increasingly, these tasks occupy the same space and time as personal activities, such as family responsibilities. Research work might require relocating one's whole life, as well as one's disciplinary knowledge and skills base. The distribution of such burdens and barriers are often gendered, and transnational mobility is not equally feasible for all; our data also indicate that, even in a European context, place and situatedness still matter. Further research is needed that takes a similarly comparative view of the European research network, with attention to resistance, directions for reform, and lived personal experience, including perceptions and feelings.

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