

Feminism, collectivity, insecurity, and complicity in precarious higher education



Jessica Wren Butler • Lancaster University
@reltubacissej • j.butler4@lancaster.ac.uk

From the ivory tower
to the neoliberal
marketplace:
gendered ideals,
competition culture,
and inequalities of
success and failure in
early 21st-century
English higher
education

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; **only a minority of men might enact it**. But it was certainly **normative**. It embodied the currently **most honored way of being** a man, it required all other men to **position themselves in relation** to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.

(Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832)

[T]here's a lot of focus on the casualised, the younger end of doctoral and post-doctoral researchers not getting full-time permanent contracts [...] but there's a lot of very quiet voluntary severance, voluntary redundancy, and compulsory redundancy going on at the so-called 'late-career' end of the spectrum. [...] **[A] permanent job is not a permanent job.** I'm here [at this institution] because I was made redundant in 2001. [...] [Y]ou get the permanent job. You think 'right ok finally I can do this.' And then along they come and get rid of you anyway.

(Participant 15)

I feel that the future is very uncertain for me and yet presumably **from the outside I would look like a person who has in place the traditional academic career.** [...] [W]ho are these people who feel like the future is secure, because I don't know any of them, or if I do I think those people might not be very awake or alert because **the future I don't think is very secure for anybody.**

(Participant 5)

Precarity
throughout
the career
structure

Complicity and conflict

There is a pointless box ticking bureaucracy that, well, you know, anything related to REF, NSS. Because it's not just pointless, it's actively harmful and I really don't like being complicit in it. And **just by working here, you're complicit.**

(Participant 21)

I haven't been striking, well, no, I did, I did one day as a marker in the sand. But **I don't know what would happen if I didn't pick up all the bits.** I'm really worried and I'm kind of gutted [...] it makes me feel terrible to not be with my colleagues but at the same time if I did, the state of the mess is bad. [...] I think it's affecting me quite badly actually because **I can't settle on a position that makes sense** to me. And I think it's because I always want to please everybody in a sense, like there's a part of me that cannot let various sort of financial catastrophes happen. Maybe I should, maybe I should say no. But I just feel like **long term down the line that has human consequences too** and I don't think I can live with them.

(Participant 5)

[W]hen does that precarity become kind of an illusion? And maybe it's always an illusion in some sense for some people and that's the thing that I really struggle with because I'm aware that **everyone around me in this whole web of nonsense is, feels almost the same way**, like maybe they're being mistreated by somebody and maybe the future all rides on something, but like I can see some clear cut cases where that is just not true. [...] I just feel like **I can see around me a lot of people who, there's such a big bouncy mat to catch them, behaving as though they have to abuse other people.** [...] It's also that thing about 'maybe it's the dicks who are getting ahead in the world so maybe I need to be more like that,' like 'write like a man' and all that stuff, 'lean in,' like some of it really encourages you to think that to get yours, to not be left behind, you might need to do certain things that feel uncomfortable, and some things feel uncomfortable just because they don't feel like they're you and maybe you should challenge that, but other things feel uncomfortable because they're wrong, and **I watch people around me not figure out that balance a lot.**

(Participant 14)

I certainly wouldn't want to encourage the sort of egotistic individualism that's too common in academia, so it's about **finding a balance between working, being an academic and preserving your own space and career at the same time as doing things right for other people**, and finding that balance I think is quite a tough one [...]. I think it's getting harder and harder to do it as well, you know, because of the **systems that measure you as an individual**, so whilst, you know, interview panels might ask, or say they want somebody who's collegiate and helpful and supportive of others, what they're looking at is 'how much money has this individual won, how many publications has this individual got?'

(Participant 12)

Finding the balance

Culture of respect

I'd like academics to respect professional services more. [...] One of the problems is, you know, we're pushed down on from above and we push out. **We don't push back up collectively.** I have a real problem with that, you know, **we take out our frustrations and fears and anxieties on our colleagues** and particularly professional services staff, which is massively unfair. [...] I'd like to see a culture of respect for everybody who works in academia because **I don't see how it's going to get better unless there's some kind of collective appreciation for what everybody's doing.** And that includes on one level the people at the top who are trying to keep the places open, you know. Not that I would ever defend a lot of their decisions but a collective understanding of what it is to be a university now and what we can do and what we can't do in terms of effecting change I think is vital.

(Participant 27)

YOU ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOU THINK



**YOUR HEALTH AND HAPPINESS
IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING**



**DO YOUR BEST
BUT DON'T SACRIFICE YOUR LIFE FOR IT.**

OTHER PEOPLE'S SUCCESSES ARE NOT YOUR FAILURE



**YOUR PATH IS YOUR PATH
AND YOU ARE DOING PERFECTLY FINE**

BE KIND



FOR EVERYONE YOU MEET IS FIGHTING A HARD BATTLE

J.BUTLER4@LANCASTER.AC.UK

@RELTUBACISSEJ