

Transcript of contribution to panel ‘Claiming space for feminism in the precarious academy’ at the Feminist and Women’s Studies Association UK 30th anniversary and Gender and Sexualities Research Centre launch event ‘Feminist Dilemmas, Feminist Hope’ at City, University of London, on Wednesday October 16th 2019.

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Intro – slide 1

I wanted to use this opportunity to share some data from my current project because my participants are much more interesting than me, so I hope you can forgive that the relevance of these slides is therefore more explicitly weighted towards precarity than feminism.

The project – slide 2

The data is taken from PhD research exploring the relationship between academic culture, competitiveness, and ideal masculinity. Through policy analysis and interviews with academic staff I’m building an image of the ideal, or hegemonic, academic, and the traits perceived to be required to succeed in the current environment. The hegemonic academic figure is developed from the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as it similarly doesn’t necessarily represent the most common way of embodying academicness, but is nonetheless the most honoured. However, for the purposes of today I’m using a few meaty interview quotes to think about three main areas: insecurity, complicity, and responsibility, both collective and individual.

Precarity throughout the career structure – slide 3

Here are two quotes on precarity from professors, one of whom was at risk of redundancy, and who were not alone in highlighting the lack of security felt at all career stages. Participant 15 says, ‘there’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.’

This is echoed by Participant 5: ‘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. Who 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.’

What I particularly want to pick up on here is the invisibility and also ubiquity of the sense of insecurity felt right up the career ladder. This anxiety also troubles staff-institution relationships, especially for those who wish to maintain a critical distance from institutions they are also reliant on for security.

Complicity and conflict – slide 4

As Participant 21 points out, just by working in a university we are complicit in its machinery, whilst Participant 5 articulates the inner conflict this provokes. This participant holds a senior management role and was interviewed during the pension strikes last year, saying, ‘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. 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. 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.’

This of course isn’t just a management dilemma but one that most of us can probably recognise from trying to reconcile the demands of the system, our own need to feel secure, and our desire to behave with the integrity of our personal politics, all whilst keeping in mind both short-term strategies and their potential future effects.

Finding the balance – slide 5

One possible consequence of collective precarity is that the things we do to try and gain personal safety, which might not always align with our ideal ethical position, can appear justified by circumstance.

Participant 14 asks, ‘when 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 feels almost the same way. 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 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.’

This is echoed by Participant 12, who notes the difficulty of building a career for yourself whilst also doing right by others, saying, ‘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.’

So, to bring this to the topic of feminism, and claiming space for feminism, it’s clear from events like today that we have claimed some space in at least some areas of the academy. Collegiality, mentorship, and support networks both within and outside academia were cited by participants as powerful protections, and some were involved in feminist or other political communities that provided a refuge. There is a danger though that these become pockets and bubbles that understandably might need to be insular, and that our sense of belonging comes at the expense of those who are excluded.

Given that precarity is clearly being felt in a very cross-cutting way I’ve been thinking more about creating space to live out feminist principles – of equality, justice, inclusivity, honesty, reflexivity – for the benefit of ourselves and others, whether feminists or not, and remain vigilant about not using our politics as a hiding place or a trump card. Though some identities are more resilient and resourced to weather the effects of precarity, and we might be able to externally hierarchise relative insecurity, there is a risk of making hardship yet another source of competition. I think we all relate most to what we feel we lack, especially if we believe there’s a scarcity of what we need, and the subjective, emotional sense of insecurity propels behaviour even for those who appear to be in a position of safety. We can’t do much about how others act from their place of anxiety, but we can at least ensure we are scrupulously honest with ourselves about our complicities, about the times we don’t get the balance quite right, and the reality of how precarious we truly are. I think it can be quite easy to feel that a feminist politics or position of marginality absolves us of complicity and that we are casualties of the culture rather than constituents of it. We can very easily point to toxic behaviours, egotistic individualism, and dicks getting ahead, but I’ve yet to encounter anyone who thinks this describes them – or anyone who, if only for a moment, even a well-intentioned one, this hasn’t applied to. And I’m very much including myself in that, of course.

Culture of respect – slide 6

The inequalities throughout academia, which precarity both reveals and exacerbates, are deep and systemic and bigger than we can hope to have meaningful impact on in the short-term, so I'd like to advocate active commitment to reflexivity and compassion as feminist acts, like Participant 27.

They identify that, '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. 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.'

I think it's true that our ire is often misdirected in a way that has no positive effect other than the illusory sense that we pushed back, and it's easy to lose sight of the conflicts and complicities felt at all levels. We are all, to greater or lesser degrees, precarious, insecure, complicit, conflicted, afraid, and making survival choices. And it's ok to put your own life jacket on first. But, it's also good practice to assess the imminence of danger, assist who else you can before it hits, and remember not to inflate it before you reach the water.

Conclusion – slide 7