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Holding ourselves to account: The precarity dividend and the ethics of researching academic precarity

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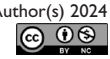
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Abstract

This article uses critical reflexivity as a method to document and analyse the ethical dilemmas that emerge when researching academic precarity across the permanent/precarious divide. With our project on long-term academic precarity as a case study, and as people who experienced long-term academic precarity, we take as the starting point other researchers' silences on their positionality and about who does the work in the production of research on academic precarity. Although our small, unfunded project was driven by feminist ethics and transformative feminist praxis, there were some ethical issues we did not foresee, nor could we resolve. We focus on three main ethical dilemmas that arose as moments of discomfort, triggering extensive reflection and discussion: (1) authenticity and subjectivity, (2) disclosure of employment status and (3) complicity in and benefit from the precarisation of academic work, or what we term the 'precarity dividend'. The article seeks to push the boundaries around how researchers hold themselves to account in the process of knowledge production. We suggest that precarity and especially the precarity dividend must become an inherent ethical consideration in all social scientific research design. It is a call for social researchers to make explicit – in writing, in ethics reviews and in presentations of their work – the labour process and labour conditions of all those involved.

Keywords

academic precarity, critical reflexivity, knowledge production, research ethics

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Introduction

In the hierarchical, neoliberalised[1] and precarised university, where grant capture, publication and citation metrics are key to career advancement, who benefits from research on precarious academics? To what extent is academic precarity furthered by research on academic precarity? In this article we examine the intersection of research ethics and academic precarity using critical reflexivity as a method to explore the ethical dilemmas that arose during our research on long-term academic precarity. We argue that sociology as a discipline needs to broaden conversations on research ethics to account for and resist the normalisation of academic precarity.

In the past decade there has been intense interest in the subject of precarious work in higher education – typically understood as work that is short-term, poorly paid, without workplace protections or prospects for improvement – and the precarity experienced by academics as a result. This research has focused on the impact of such work on workers' mental health, sense of self, relationships and lives (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Loveday, 2018; Manzi et al., 2019), its intersections with race, gender, care, class, mobility and citizenship (Arday, 2022; Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023; Courtois & O'Keefe, 2024; Crew, 2020; Ivancheva et al., 2019; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019, 2020), its impact on teaching and learning and other functions of the university (Lopes & Dewan, 2015) and resistance (Vatansever, 2023). Though there has been much written to document how academic precarity is created, exacerbated and normalised within higher education, there has been relative scholarly silence on the ethics of researching academic precarity including who researches academic precarity, under what conditions and to what end.

To kickstart a conversation about the relationship between ethical research and academic precarity, we explore this very intersection through an examination of the ethical challenges and considerations that arose during the course of our research project, The Precarity Penalty, which used biographical interviews with current and former academics who have experience of long-term precarity. We take inspiration from feminist standpoint theory and use critical reflexivity to analyse the ethical dilemmas we encountered throughout the process of data collection, analysis and project design. Borrowing from Pillow's (2003) concept of 'reflexivities of discomfort', we examine what we consider to be 'moments of discomfort' that arose for us during interviews with participants, which we situate alongside the methodological decisions taken to make the research ethical, and the dimensions of transformative feminist praxis that underpin this research. For us, critical reflexivity is both an intellectual and political endeavour. As Srila Roy (2023) argues, exercising critical reflexivity in relation to research processes can be disruptive of neoliberal demands and expectations regarding research. In this spirit, we wish to hold ourselves to account by exploring how we tried to navigate ethical dilemmas and moral questions that arise when we locate ourselves as subjects/observers who, while now on permanent contracts, have extensive experience of academic precarity. To examine the significance of the permanent/precarious divide in conducting research on academic precarity, we analyse our reflexive dialogue with each other as we progressed through the research project.

For this article, we focus on three main ethical dilemmas that arose as moments of discomfort, triggering extensive reflection and discussion: (1) authenticity and subjectivity, (2) disclosure of employment status and (3) complicity in and benefit from the precarisation of academic work, or what we term the 'precarity dividend'. This analysis contributes to ongoing conversations about researcher positionality, power, the labour of knowledge production and ethics in research in the context of the precarisation of academic labour (Morley, 2016; Papoulias & Callard, 2022; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2019), with reference to feminist ethics in research on/by precarious subjects (Pearce, 2020; Smithers et al., 2022; Warnock et al., 2022). The analysis of our reflections suggests there are a particular set of considerations that must be engaged with when conducting research on academic precarity, both in relation to the community being researched and the subject position of the researchers. We go further, however, and make the unique claim that academic precarity must be accounted for as an ethical imperative in social scientific research design. Based on our analysis, we argue that the concept of ethics as it is considered within our discipline, sociology, must be broadened to include academic precarity; that transparency on the division of labour in research, especially as it relates to academic precarity, must be made a part and parcel of research ethics. In other words, we should all hold ourselves to account and explicitly outline the precarity dividend in all social scientific research.

To our knowledge, there is little crossover in the sociological literature on research ethics and precarious academic labour. In comparison to other disciplines and scholarly communities, most notably anthropology, sociology has been slow to take a position on academic precarity.[2] While they provide compelling analyses of the neoliberal pressures to be fast, productive and competitive, calls for 'slow scholarship' and 'slow sociology' have also been silent on the issue (Garey et al., 2014; Mountz et al., 2015; O'Neill & Carrigan, 2015; Vostal, 2016). Besbris and Khan (2017) argue sociology as a discipline needs to engage more in processes of evaluation, while Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) suggest the value of critical reflexivity lies not just in its generative capacities but that it is a key process in decolonising methodologies. Therefore, though our research project on long-term academic precarity is rooted in feminist standpoint theory, this article also answers calls for all sociologists to engage in more critical reflection for the betterment of the discipline.

Ethics and academic precarity: An overview

Positionality, risk and exploitation in research on/by precarious academics

Despite the groundswell of research over the past decade on precarity in higher education institutions, little space has been devoted to thinking through methodological questions as they relate to the study of precarious academic work and experiences of academic precarity. This is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that academic precarity has yet to be epistemologically or ontologically well-defined. Some scholars focus on the workplace, where academic precarity emerges as a form of non-citizenship whereby precarious workers are marginalised across multiple dimensions (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019), while others examine it as a condition that extends beyond the workplace deep into workers'

lives and shapes their subjectivities (Albayrak-Aydemir & Gleibs, 2022; Burton & Bowman, 2022). Research on academic precarity often delves into personal and painful issues, relying on participants to share uncomfortable and sometimes distressing experiences. Though the risk is often unstated, much of the insightful work on academic precarity has been done by those who are themselves precarious and who are inspired to research the subject based on their lived experiences (Buckle, 2021; Ivancheva & Keating, 2020; Lopes & Dewan, 2015; Manzi et al., 2019; Vatansever, 2020). Precarious academics are authentic voices on their own experiences; and they are uniquely positioned to research a phenomenon that sometimes creates feelings of shame and guilt in those affected by it (Loveday, 2018). By making explicit their precarious status, the authors, like the participants, take the risk of presenting themselves as vulnerable and as unsuccessful subjects in the competitive and casualised university. They also expose themselves to possible retaliation, for complaining about one's working conditions comes at that risk (Ahmed, 2021). Those who speak to their experiences of precarity are, in effect, whistle-blowers on their institutions. They may disclose wrongdoings including unfair or fraudulent employment practices, discrimination, bullying and harassment. The risk goes beyond loss of one's employment, as evidenced by Ruth Pearce (2020), who gives a powerful account of how her life was at risk through the confluence of her precarious status, transmisogyny and inaccessible institutional support.

The dangers of being sidelined or punished for speaking up while precarious may explain the proliferation of anonymous blogs and media articles written by precarious academics about their experiences, and the occasional use of pseudonyms for precarious co-authors in research on precarity and exploitation (Hadjisolomou et al., 2022; see also Anonymous [2023] on a migrant academic's mental health struggles and 'Dr Anonymous' [2021] on being an academic and a sex worker). It may also explain why some researchers of academic precarity are silent on their precarious employment status in their published writings (we deliberately give no examples here to respect authors' decision not to disclose their status).[3]

Those less at risk because of the protection afforded by a permanent status also produce research on academic precarity. In some cases, these researchers explicitly mention their previous experience of precarity (Loveday, 2018); but many are silent on their current employment position or previous experience of precarity (if any).[4] This is surprising because academics occupy a position of privilege relative to most groups they study and the work it takes to become a 'trusted outsider' is typically acknowledged in other fields of research, for example research on those in prison (Bucerius, 2013). This is particularly problematic in the field of research on academic precarity, where the researcher and the researched occupy different positions in a shared, highly hierarchical space, and where allyship cannot be assumed or taken for granted.

A third scenario is where research on precarious academics is conducted jointly by permanent and precarious researchers or where precarious researchers are hired to work on research projects concerned with academic precarity. Though the labour processes involved in academic knowledge production have been at the centre of expositions on academic precarity, there is limited transparency or discussion about such processes, including the division of labour, working conditions and workers' roles in research production from design to dissemination in research projects about academic precarity. With

notable exceptions (Ahmed et al., 2022; Breeze & Taylor, 2020; Murgia & Poggio, 2019; Smithers et al., 2022), typically these publications do not provide any information about the labour processes involved in the research and are silent on the hierarchical relationships within the research team. The labour processes are also rarely discussed in publications emerging from large, international projects on academic work and research.[5]

It has been argued that the neoliberalisation of the university is largely to blame for the exploitation of precarious researchers. Permanent academics are under pressure to secure large grants and to deliver numerous outputs, while research agendas themselves are increasingly determined externally (Macfarlane, 2021; Morley, 2016). In this context, some choose to delegate much of the research work – as well as their own teaching loads – to precarious workers. Other structural factors are at play: the demarcation between the research assistant, conceptualised as a worker, and the PI, presented as the intellectual owner of the project and producer of ideas, is often classed and gendered (Reay, 2004; Zheng, 2018), with race also a factor (Arday, 2022; Bhopal, 2016; Schofield, 2022; Sian, 2019). In this context, research assistants are often unsupported and poorly managed (Smithers et al., 2022). They may be denied authorship despite playing a key role in the production of knowledge, sometimes through an active mobilisation of their positionality in the field under study – as members of a community, speakers of the language, etc. The use and abuse of casualised research labour have been problematised in the context of conflict and development studies, although few studies name these practices as exploitative or ethically unsound (Deane & Stevano, 2016; Jenkins, 2018; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2019).

Another important ethical dimension that is under-considered with respect to academic precarity is the exploitation of research participants. Hugman and colleagues (2011) argue 'do no harm' is not enough when it comes to marginalised groups and encourage social work researchers to think beyond ethics codes to ensure that the research, first and foremost, benefits the participants, rather than the researchers. Exploitation can take various forms, such as exploitative, voyeuristic depictions of poverty or violence (Macías, 2016), a risk that exists in research on academic precarity, where experiences of poverty and sexual violence may be reported. Exploitation may also include taking the time of those likely to experience time poverty. Buckle (2021) reflects on the ethical dilemma of researching housing precarity during a pandemic, when participants may be at their most vulnerable; while Warnock et al. (2022) draw on their experiences as precarious researchers of precarity to argue that research participants who are precarious should be remunerated for their time and role in the production of knowledge. Papoulias and Callard (2022) draw attention to the use of 'survivors' as research participants and increasingly, as (subaltern) members of research teams in the field of mental health research. In this case, while these researchers as 'insiders' to the community under study are in a privileged position to produce knowledge for the institution, they remain marginalised and are in effect victims of epistemic injustice within the university. Thus, despite these scholarly attempts to problematise academic precarity, the question of how to do this research ethically and transformatively remains outstanding.

Through the article, we tease through some of these issues by identifying and analysing the ethical and moral conundrums we faced as we straddled the permanent/precarious

divide to conduct research that, at its heart, was undertaken to resist academic precarity. In the next section we detail our methodological approach before moving on to address the three key nodal points that caused moments of discomfort throughout the course of the research, namely (1) authenticity and positionality, (2) disclosure of employment status and (3) the research labour process and the precarity dividend. We then analyse the implications of these findings for future research on academic precarity and, more broadly, for considerations of what constitutes ethical social scientific research.

Standpoint(s), reflexivity and ethical feminist research: Our methodology

Though there are contestations over what constitutes feminist standpoint theory and how to practise it well, reflexivity as an exercise in methodological and ethical evaluation is generally accepted as a useful and worthy tool. Instead of the masculinist bias often cloaked in the language of objectivity, reflexivity was offered up as a mechanism of checks and balances to ensure a sound and democratic social science that stresses the importance of understanding the impact of the researcher on the research participants and the research outcomes (Oakley, 1998, p. 724). Feminist reflexivity is a form of feminist accountability. To name oneself, one's positionality and location within the research and in relation to the researched is an exercise in attention to power relations in the production of knowledge. To be reflexive, feminists argue, is to be attuned to the hierarchical nature of research, and that the experiential knowledge of the researcher also shapes research processes and outcomes (England, 1994; Smith, 1988). It is a revolving process of reflection undertaken by a researcher as they design, conduct and analyse research. The location of the self in the research, and a conscious articulation of one's position relative to the communities under research, the power relations that arise due to the research process and indeed the extraction of knowledge for the university are prioritised as points of reflection by feminist methodologies. Reflexivity, in essence, offers a means of doing ethical research.

Decolonial feminists have been at the forefront of developing a meaningful critical reflexivity as a method and championing it as an accountability measure for research (D'Arcangelis, 2018). Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo (2023) argues that reflexivity can serve as an ethical compass for a knowledge production that privileges fair collaboration and considers the implications of authorship and ownership. A protracted debate has ensued, however, about what useful reflexivity might look like and how it might escape its tendency, as Patai (1994) highlights, to be little more than self-indulgent navel gazing. In a similar vein, Pillow (2003) argues for a move away from treating reflexivity as an act of confession, oriented instead towards uncomfortable exposition or 'reflexivities of discomfort' (p. 188). Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) argue that though critical reflexivity can be a powerful tool for decolonising methodologies and speaking to power relations in research, it has tended to produce 'confessions of privilege' that are not necessarily useful. Furthermore, as Stacey (1988) argues, reflexivity does not necessarily mitigate against power in knowledge production, including in relations between workers who produce knowledge, a point that is intimately connected to the matter of academic precarity.

In 2020, during a global pandemic, we sought to correct the tendency within the research on academic precarity to equate precarity with younger workers or those in the earlier stages of their careers. We designed a project to examine long-term precarity, which we defined as five years or more doing precarious academic work, with some of that time being spent in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). Precarious work is a striking feature of the third-level landscape in Ireland, which ranks the worst for education spending out of 38 OECD countries (OECD, 2021). Core funding for HEIs is 40% lower than a decade ago; the student–staff ratio is 20:1 compared to the European norm of 15:1. Though no definite data exist on the number of workers employed in the sector on a non-permanent basis, some projections place it at 50%, with higher numbers in some disciplines (Delaney, 2020). With this context as our backdrop, we set out to explore the extent to which long-term precarity impacted people's health and well-being, their career trajectory and career prospects. We conducted 40 interviews via MS Teams with people from a range of backgrounds, though mostly concentrated in the humanities and social sciences. We used biographical interviews and timeline analysis to sketch the precarious academic life course as we felt these would best capture the non-linear nature of precarious work as well as the structural and social processes that perpetuate precarity. This approach has been identified elsewhere as an important intervention in the development of an 'intersectional method' (Buitelaar, 2006; Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Prins, 2006). Examining, as Christensen and Jensen (2012) term it, the 'interplay between roots and routes' adds richness to both the data and subsequent analysis and sheds light on the multiple experiences and challenges faced by precarious workers in the academy, including those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Reflexivity has been the ethical compass throughout the design, implementation and analysis of our research in the Precarity Penalty project. Throughout the course of the interviews, we actively engaged in the process of collective reflection. At the end of each interview, we held a 'debrief' session with each other, in text form – on what worked, what was left out or uncovered, questions we were not comfortable posing and why. We kept a log of these 'reflexive research notes' that we used as the basis of our reflections for this article. Part of this dialogical process focused on the ethical concerns that surfaced, which we did not foresee in advance of the project.

For us, reflexivity in practice means locating ourselves and our lived experience within the research without centring ourselves, acknowledging power relations in the process of knowledge production, including labour relations, and privileging the lived experience of our research participants. It also means reflecting on and being upfront about our moments of discomfort that arose throughout the research. We attempt to overcome some of the pitfalls of critical reflexivity identified by Patai (1994), Stacey (1988), Pillow (2003) and Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) through not just locating ourselves within the research but by interrogating our complicity in academic precarity as our employment positions changed over time. We suggest part of the issue is that reflexivity typically does not extend to locating oneself in the labour processes involved in knowledge production. As a corrective, we interpret locating oneself in the research to mean not just one's own positionality in relation to the research topic but also in the research process, including the labour process involved in research production. Doing so forced us to ask uncomfortable yet necessary questions about power relations in the production

of knowledge, an exercise that veers more towards exposition rather than confessional. This is akin to what Palaganas et al. (2017) call 'journeys of learning' as a form of methodological interrogation.

Holding ourselves to account? Reflections on the ethics of researching long-term precarity

Authenticity, positionality and precarity

Our reflexivity is imbued with our own personal and political connection to academic precarity. Our research interest in the subject began in 2013, when one of us was unemployed after losing a case in the labour court, while the other was doing hourly paid teaching work across several institutions. We were in the process of building a collective to campaign against the casualisation of labour in Irish higher education. We designed a piece of participatory action research in the form of an online survey, with two aims: first, to document the phenomenon as a basis for our campaign; and second, to reach out to others in similar situations. This work was published in standard academic outlets (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019) but also disseminated via blogs and public talks. In 2020, we commenced our research project on long-term academic precarity, the study that forms the basis of our reflections in this article. In the meantime, we were both appointed into permanent posts and therefore the later project was conducted from the perspective of staff who had substantial lived experience of academic precarity but who now occupied positions of security and privilege (and potentially, power) relative to our participants.

Our positionality was an ethical dilemma and ongoing node of reflection for us. Are we 'of the community' which we research and, if not, is it ethical to do so anyway? Writing in 1987, Canadian feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith argued (1987, p. 107) that the only way to know the social world is from within, through experiences of everyday life. She contended that the situated knowledge of women researchers, their 'embodied subjectivity', is what facilitates the act of knowing and understanding that which they wish to study or speak to. For Smith, experience is a method of speaking – and something that holds true for participants as well as researchers. However, our identities are multiple and shifting and what might be read as an authentic subject position for us might not be read the same for those who are currently precarious. While it was our own lived experiences that allowed us to formulate questions about long-term precarity in the first place, we were and continue to be troubled by our authenticity given our newer subject position as permanent academics. This raises the broader question of who can speak on behalf of whom? Can those who do not presently encounter risk of punishment and further marginalisation when speaking out against this exploitation truly know how the webs of power and institutional violence operate in real time? Can we, as permanent academics, still make sound and ethical knowledge claims about academic precarity? In undertaking this latest research, we were acutely aware of the relative freedoms now afforded to us by a permanent academic post. Unlike in the case of our previous research, we no longer had to fear being deemed unemployable for speaking out against the exploitative practices that are normalised within universities. This was a central concern

for us as we engaged in this research and one which became more pointed as it progressed. While we shared the characteristics of being white and cis-gendered with many of our participants, we were also aware that these compounded our positions of privilege (Arday, 2022; Bhopal, 2016; Stockfelt, 2018).

On the other hand, it could be suggested that we have the epistemic advantage of the 'outsider within', to appropriate Patricia Hill Collins (1990). Our experience of long-term precarity gives us a particular situated view in relation to the daily indignities and injustices of academic precarity, as well as economic insecurity and other impacts acutely experienced by some of our participants. In some cases, we found we had worked in the same institutions as our participants and had the same struggles. Phrases like 'it was good to talk to someone who knows what it's like', 'as I'm sure you'll know' and 'you've probably been there' punctuated many of our interviews. Even though we are now permanent, we still bear the scars of precarity and the implications of long-term precarity in terms of hindered career progression, damaged health and finances that will stay with us for the duration of our lifetimes. Thus, to some extent our significant lived experience afforded us the authenticity to research the issue and indeed to weave our lived experience into the very fabric of the project. As part of the project design, we began by interviewing each other to understand what it would feel like to be asked the difficult questions we had planned to cover. Our interviews with each other were lengthy (over two hours), emotional and brought forth recollections that we had not mentioned to each other previously. Curiously, some aspects or events came to the surface that had seemed insignificant but became meaningful through the interview process. Each of us were surprised at what we had failed to mention in our interviews and, quite significantly, how difficult it was to talk about stigma, even to each other as close friends and collaborators. We also chose to include these interviews in the hopes of removing the boundary marker between the researched and the researcher and as a means of reinforcing a sense of authenticity derived from our own situated knowledge.

Despite our subaltern knowledge, we remain unsure if we are writing as members of the community being researched and this was accentuated during several interviews where the boundaries between permanent and precarious became simultaneously clear and muddied. For us, this raised questions about disclosure and power over research participants and this emerges in relation to other ethical dilemmas we address below.

Disclosure of researcher employment status

One of the blind spots we did not anticipate was the rupture between the precarious subject and the permanent subject as it emerged through the course of the interviews. We therefore did not discuss how or indeed if it was necessary to 'disclose' our permanent status to participants. As the research progressed, we became worried that participants, many of whom would have been aware of our activism around the issue of academic precarity, might not be aware that we are now permanent. We wondered whether that would impact what they chose to share with us or even if they wanted to continue. Disclosure did not take place in all interviews and if it did occur, it was at random stages throughout the interviews, often in a response to an inference made on behalf of the participant. For example, in several earlier interviews the researcher used the language of

'us' and 'we' near the beginning of the interview in framing a question about experiences of precarity. The researcher corrected herself to clarify for the respondent that she is no longer precarious. In another interview, disclosure arose near the end of the interview relating to a discussion on a shared experience of unsuccessfully seeking a contract of indefinite duration. In both cases, this seemed to cause a shift in the interview, in that the researcher was then asked questions and advice about that experience. In later interviews, one researcher decided to disclose her status as permanent at the very start, as part of a short presentation of her trajectory to each participant, to which participants reacted positively ('so you know the pain'; '[nodding] you've been there'). Upon post-interview reflection, both researchers noted this issue of disclosure as a moment of discomfort. This relates in part to the above point on authenticity and being accepted as authentic agitators against academic precarity. However, it also connects to the need for more consideration around the intersections of transparency, power and access to information.

Throughout our fieldwork we were faced with the dilemma of how to best attend to the precarious/permanent binary while simultaneously not reifying it. At times we both felt discomfort in trying to empathise with participants by acknowledging our shared experiences of shame, rejection and exploitation within academia. Several participants told us about being rejected after applying for what they considered to be 'their own jobs', namely the jobs they were already doing as precarious workers. Though this is something that both authors also experienced it felt uncomfortable to raise in interviews because it reminded us of the 'CV of failures' trend on academic Twitter, whereby very successful senior academics publicly shared lists of their old grant and article rejections. This was supposed to normalise rejection and make them appear as a routine feature of academic life, but erased the material consequences of rejection for precarious academics. Recalling past rejections from a position of security (and in some cases, power and prestige) is not the same as experiencing a rejection when precarious, when it can mean the end of a career as well.

The issue of disclosure also arose in relation to our long, multi-institutional histories of precarious work in Ireland and exacerbated by the small and interconnected academic community on the island. Because we were usually excluded from institutional webpages, it would not be easy to locate our full work biographies through an internet search. Thus, at times moments of discomfort arose due to our unequal positions within the academic hierarchy, which resonates with Hamilton's (2020) view that critical reflexivity can reveal unanticipated power relations in the research process. This included the naming of staff members with whom the authors were familiar, who participants identified as treating them poorly while under their employ. This was true in cases where participants knew of an existing familiarity with the employer in question, or where it could be assumed that participants were unfamiliar with the researcher's career trajectory and therefore unwittingly speaking of a network with which she was familiar. Though this is to be expected given the small size of the academic community in Ireland, we now wonder if it would have been best to notify respondents of our career trajectories and networks so that they could make their own choices around what to disclose based on knowledge about our backgrounds. This unresolved tension between the insider/outsider subject position cannot be claimed as a research success or failure but what Pillow (2003) positively terms a 'messy example' of the realities of doing qualitative research.

Research ethics, knowledge production and the precarity dividend

Ethical accounts of knowledge production do not usually take account of the labour processes that are often reliant on academic precarity to function. Much of the knowledge produced within the confines of the academy has happened through the labour of precarious academics, whether as research assistants, postdoctoral researchers or as adjuncts who teach on the buyouts enabled by research grants (Murgia & Poggio, 2019; Ross & Savage, 2021). As our previous research indicates (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015), this labour is typically invisible, even the labour involved in data collection. Precarity is embedded within the hierarchical structure of academia and even the most sympathetic are complicit in its continued proliferation. There are similarities to be drawn here with Raewyn Connell's (2005) 'complicit masculinity' and how men who embody it benefit from the 'patriarchal dividend'. Permanent academics are complicit in and benefit from the 'precarity dividend' in their workloads, the type of work they do, and in their advancement up the academic ladder. Despite the centrality of the labour process to academic knowledge production, an ethics of doing research that documents the dialectical nature of knowledge production, i.e. brings to the fore an account of all labour, is not common practice, in feminist research ethics or sociological research, including in research on academic precarity itself.

Liz Stanley (1990, p. 8) offers perhaps the most comprehensive discussion on the relationship between knowledge production, feminist ethics and the academic labour process. She argues that when we look at these components in concert, it reveals the darker side of social research as an endeavour that is hierarchical and gendered, which creates a two-tier labour market within the academy. As she writes, one of the preconditions for 'good research' is that it should account for the conditions of its own production (1990, p. 13). Arguably then, to apply an ethical feminist approach means that when researching precarity this should, in practice, force us to confront the dialectic relations between permanency and precarity. It must also mean not relying on precarious labour to complete this research. This forced us to confront our own authenticity in relation to our teaching and research more generally and how we too now as permanent staff benefit from the precarity dividend.

Our Precarity Penalty project was undertaken in whole by the two researchers. We designed and managed the project, conducted all interviews, coded them and analysed them. An important characteristic of this research project is that it was 'unfunded'.[6] There were no research assistants, PhD researchers or postdoctoral researchers working on the project, nor did we benefit from teaching buyouts to complete this project. This was an ethical decision taken as we conceived of the project, wherein we asked ourselves how we could feasibly conduct a sizeable research project without support. We also set out to transcribe all our interviews and accepted it would take longer than other research projects as a result. This has meant a slower scholarship but, we might argue, a more meaningful one. With just over half of the interviews transcribed in full we decided to use our institutional research funds to pay for the transcription of the remaining interviews to enable progress with data analysis. This slow scholarship has come at the expense of not just outputs to add to our CVs but it limits our ability to publicly disseminate our findings and contribute to ongoing government debates on the future of higher

education in Ireland, or to share with campaign groups who are lobbying in the area. This feels counterproductive and in conflict with our research goals, and indeed runs counter to the expectation that several of our respondents had about the utility of the work contributing to changing the narrative around academic precarity. Though the tension between producing ethical scholarship (in the sense outlined above) and timely research valued by the neoliberal university is, to a certain extent, driven by a desire to succeed within the parameters set out by these neoliberal regimes, for us, this means consciously neglecting the benchmarks needed to secure timely advancement up the career ladder, and instead prioritising research that we hope helps to push back against the neoliberal university.

Subject positions and feminist praxis

As we reflected on our moments of discomfort, broader questions arose for us in relation to whether we should continue to conduct research on academic precarity as permanent academics. We are forced to ask, is it ethically sound if we, or indeed any permanent staff, were to engage in research on academic precarity? This connects to questions regarding authenticity, positionality and who has the right to speak. These questions are at the heart of the ongoing decolonial dialogues within the social sciences. Matthews (2021), for instance, queries whether it is desirable for white academics to write on decolonisation as it runs the risk of being an exercise that only relieves white guilt and does little to move the centre to the margins (Khoo, 2024). The accrual of non-racist capital by white academics who write on decolonialisation can dangerously serve as an act of contrition, rather than a meaningful political alliance that interrogates and dismantles white privilege (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Similar questions have been raised by feminist standpoint theory, which asks, why is knowledge being produced and by whom? Are we, by writing and researching academic precarity, contributing to the obstructions that prevent precarious academics from having their voices heard? In much the same way that Dorothy Smith (1979) argued that men control ideological production and they have access to and reproduce knowledge, the same can be said of permanent staff, who, because of the structure of academia, have access to the means to produce knowledge.

Given the precarity dividend, the sensitivities around whistleblowing and wider power dynamics of researching one's own (hierarchical) community, feminist ethics offers important direction here. Feminism has highlighted the need for the research to be transformative – to be connected to struggles for gender equality in wider society and to contribute to such struggles through feminist praxis. In her ground-breaking book on feminist praxis, Liz Stanley (1990, p. 15) quipped, 'the point is to change the world, not only to study it'. This is a significant guiding principle for all of our research on academic precarity, which seeks to be transformative in several ways.

In our view, research on precarity has, first and foremost, to be motivated by the purpose of the abolishment of precarity. Permanent staff who wish to write on precarity must do so only out of a desire for genuine allyship and therefore must seek to instigate change. Incorporating ethical practices and accountability on the use of precarious labour in one's own research coupled with doing research that exposes the precarity dividend may help circumvent problematic forms of allyship, such as the use of writing as an

instrument to allay guilt, as per Matthews (2021) outlined above. The transformative potential in our research lies not only in the expert knowledge derived from being located within the research but it also serves to dismantle the power relations that reinforce precarity, through the stigmatisation of precarious workers and the silencing and shaming of those trapped in precarity on a long-term basis. Writing and researching on precarity disrupts the silence and gives space to those often invisibilised within academia. Done by those with lived experience of precarity, this becomes a subversive act. This of course does not come without risks, but our material conditions cushion any penalties levied against us.

Another dimension of feminist praxis in our work is our continued use of research as a platform for change. In practice that means organising in and beyond our workplaces and using the research to inform practice, which includes speaking at events organised by postgraduate workers' unions, university Athena SWAN and EDI units, academic and public sector trade union events and meetings, and contributing to government policy formation. We share our findings with groups who challenge precarity, speak regularly to the media and share our findings with government officials. We also work within university and trade union structures to press the issue of academic precarity. One of the authors helped to found the Irish Precarity Network and helped to write two of their submissions to government bodies. We also organised our own events to bring together precarious academic workers and to share our findings. Ethical research on precarity must be about more than just publishing in academic journals or books and presenting results exclusively at academic conferences. The production of knowledge on precarity must be for the purposes of challenging it, not reinforcing it or for the sole purpose of career progression or personal gain.

That this work should be transformative was also expected from research participants, as many thanked us for doing this research, noting its importance – not as an academic intervention – but as something that shines a light on their plight. And thus, we still find ourselves asking is what we do enough? Leaving aside the intangible question of how much change this research will effect, will any success be undone by our complicit participation in these normalised labour relations? Future research grants, for instance, will no doubt make us complicit, or worse, active agents in precarisation. Therefore, even though we outline here some ethical dilemmas in relation to research on academic precarity, the implications extend into all areas of research (and teaching).

Concluding thoughts: Rethinking research ethics from a feminist anti-precarity perspective

In this article we set out to employ critical, feminist reflexivity as a method to examine the ethics of conducting research on precarious academics. This has been useful for uncovering taken for granted assumptions on the ethical dangers that can be encountered when conducting research across the precarious/permanent divide. Specifically, we identified how the precarious/permanent divide surfaced ethical questions in relation to disclosure of employment status and social/professional networks, transparency on the division of labour in research production, and the potential for extractivist research that gorges on the scarce time of precarious workers to act as ventriloquists of their pain

stories (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Critical reflection on our ethical moments of discomfort highlights the difficulties of navigating the research process in an ethical way under the confines of the neoliberal university. These moments of discomfort are red flags that signal the potential for research on academic precarity to be ethically murky or even exploitative of research participants as well as research colleagues. Furthermore, our reflections highlight the need for research on academic precarity to be explicitly transformative, for its purpose to be ultimately about unveiling and pushing back against the precarisation of academic work.

What we take away from our analysis of these reflections is the need for greater conversations around labour, subjectivity and exploitation not just in the research on academic precarity but in social scientific research more generally. Our research into long-term academic precarity shows it and the working conditions of precarious academics are not just part and parcel of macro processes within the neoliberal university, but they also come about by design on a micro level through, for instance, research project design and the research production process and through disciplinary norms. Though we highlight the potential areas for negative consequences in this article, we also demonstrate that there is agency within the neoliberal academy to not reproduce exploitative working relations and to design research that might be called 'precarity conscious'. If we are serious about tackling academic precarity, we must begin by centring the labour process in relation to academic precarity as an ethical issue in social scientific research. Labour, academic or otherwise, is the spine of research and the basis of knowledge production. We therefore use our critical reflections on our research process to call for sociology to reckon with academic precarity, and the precarity dividend, to develop a set of ethical principles on labour and knowledge production that has as the starting point the rejection of precarisation.

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Notes

1. Here we mean the project that pursues and privileges commodification, competition, marketisation, perpetual restructuring and the worsening of working conditions which ordinarily manifests as the introduction of or increase in student fees, growth in the numbers and power of managers, the casualisation of labour, increase in capital ventures, etc.
2. In a review of the published ethical codes of conduct of the British Sociological Association, the American Sociological Association, the European Sociological Association and the Sociological Association of Ireland, only the latter last speaks to academic precarity and has an extensive ethical guide on the use of precarious labour in research and teaching (https://sociology.ie/ethical-guidelines/)

3. While researching this piece, we found many examples of articles on academic precarity where the authors did not mention their employment status. This was the case for both permanent and precarious academics. While a quick internet search generally reveals who is precarious, we respect the authors' choice by not giving examples of such occurrences.
4. For consistency we do not name any of these authors either. This is something we found by examining the methods section of articles by academics whose employment status we were familiar with, or could confirm via an internet search.
5. While they may not use the term 'precarity', large international research projects such as UNIKE, FESTA have examined the work of 'early career researchers' as part of larger studies of academic work, scientific mobility and women in science.
6. This is a problematic designation in its own right, as technically research conducted by salaried research staff under the auspices of the university is funded.

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