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Women's ways of working: Circumventing the masculine structures operating within and upon the University

Abstract

Three female, and feminist, academics become participant researchers to explore their working practices seeking to make visible the ways they work to wo(*man*age) the masculinist environment of the University. After reviewing the literature, the paper starts by considering what 'masculinist' means in this context, finding that it refers to both rigidity of structure positioned as 'impartial' and, paradoxically, processes that enable competition and the clear identification of winners and losers; a University regime compatible with neo-liberal governance. Such values are at odds with those promoted within Early Years Education where 'caring' and 'inclusion' are fundamental, embedded in a strong 'domestic' tradition. The paper examines the historical practice of transferring 'mothering' skills into the educational institution and considers current attitudes and behaviours in relation to this synergy.

Analysing their own attitudes and practices through an innovative (and time-effective) methodology, AAA/I (Asynchronous Associative Auto/Inquiry), the participant researchers consider the ways in which, through collaboration, they ameliorate University processes and working conditions to support each other and their students. Findings are discussed in relation to masculinist traditions and competitiveness, collaboration and caring, and the creation of 'protective enclaves', feminised micro-contexts within the larger masculinist domain. Considering their actions *in toto*, the trio reflect on the extent that their actions promote, evade or hinder a move towards greater gender equality and admit to the personal costs of continually striving to change the working environment.

Keywords:
Higher education; University; Gender; Feminist research; Caring; Reflective practice

Introduction

This paper uses a gendered frame to examine how female academics can enhance their working conditions and the satisfaction of their female students by adopting collaborative, even collusive, 'ways of working'. The discussion is deliberately a gendered one because we are choosing to explore our ideas from a feminist position but also for practical reasons: we are all women, and for the most part our students are female too (but when male students enrol we do include them in our supportive practices). It sets out to consider how, as women, we *man*age our working lives, seeking successful careers within a profession where the 'ways of working' are commonly termed masculinist and men are promoted more often than women.[*] It was our intention to focus on the positive strategies we employ but, in response to feedback, we later discuss the cost of this positivity on our individual career progression and the choices that we have made. There is no intention to present a

[*] Only 23% of professors were female. 2014/15. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats-staff.

saccharine account, to artificially sweeten the discussion but nor do we want to position our university as a difficult place to work. From our reading and our academic networks we know that the challenges we face are not uncommon.

The paper takes a narrative approach. It aims to blend the stories of three individuals with different career trajectories to find a 'common' voice. We have been colleagues for many years, co-teachers and -researchers within the same university department and, more importantly, remain close friends despite working in an environment that is often considered to promote competition rather than the caring ethos we value. Part of our survival strategy includes developing novel ways of working like the research methodology that we describe within this paper, an approach that enabled us to share our reflections even though we were too busy to meet together face-to-face. The intention was to collect the relevant aspects of our 'life stories' and set them in context in order to weave a coherent 'life history' of our working practices. In doing this, we were following a tradition commonly used within education (eg: Ball and Goodson, 1985; Clough, 2002; Goodson et al, 2010, Trahar, 2006), a research tradition in which Hazel frequently works (eg: Wright, 2011, 2016) and with which Paulette and Linda are familiar. In this tradition criticality is achieved through making appropriate connections to create a coherent and contextualised account. Rather than embracing a particular philosophical framework, this is an abductive process whereby the analysis iterates between narrative and locally relevant theory.

In this paper we consider the masculine structures that regulate university practices and the ways that political and economic forces within society conspire to keep these practices in place even though women account for almost half of academic staff (2013/14 figures, HESA, 2015a) and more than half of students (56.1% compared to 43.9% in 2013/14, HESA, 2015b). We make this claim in full awareness that in so doing we are using metrics that derive from those masculinist practices of measuring and monitoring that we at other times will decry. Despite inhabiting this paradoxical position, we argue that many masculinist structures fit uncomfortably alongside the feminist traditions of 'care' and 'nurture' that mark the domestic sphere from its oppositional, even antagonistical space, the aptly named public sphere, traditionally the reserve of men and male workers in society. This distinction inhabits a position increasingly challenged by female academics, challenged retrospectively by those researching the history of women's education and women's lives using family records and private diaries, and pro-actively by feminist activists who advocate for greater equality of opportunity and better treatment of women. By listing these women as separate and specific archetypes we are not suggesting that these are either exclusive or exhaustive categories, just (wo)*man*aging our limited time and space as effectively as possible. In this paper we deliberately bring the narratives of higher and early childhood education together as these essentially reflect the position we inhabit. For us, the conflicts centre on our (subjective) need to act 'flexibly' to support the individual within a world structured to ensure (objective) parity of treatment and (competitively) the ranking of outcomes.

Our place within existing literature

The dominance of men and male traditions over those of the female staff within the academy is well-documented (Acker and Dillabough, 2007; Bagilhote, 2002; Probert, 2005). Writing from a sociological/educational perspective, Miriam David (2016:15) describes how 'universities today remain bastions of both male power and privilege'.

She claims, too (David, 2015:15) that policy is focused on students rather than staff and that neo-liberalism has both encouraged and obscured the lack of gender equality. David (2015) endorses Morley's (2013) claim that managerialism and the 'leaderist turn' are reinforcing the dominance of patriarchal rules (the masculinist traditions), a view shared by Teelken and Deem (2013) and found, in an Australian context, to concentrate women in the least secure and lowest paid positions (Lafferty and Fleming, 2000). David also reiterates the findings of Barbara Bagilhote and Kate White (2011, 2013) that although women are now more numerous in HE across the globe, they still remain under-represented in high-level roles, excluded from the most senior positions. Specifically researching gender inequality within UK departments of Geography, Avril Maddrell and colleagues (2016) acknowledge problems of early-career precarity, workload pressures, stress-related illness, discrimination, harassment and bullying with long-term consequences on personal life decisions around parenthood and ultimately pensions; the prevalence of what Valentine et al (2014) term 'ordinary sexism'. Considering how esteem affects promotion, Kelly Coate and Camille Kandiko Howson (2016) identify homosociability, non-transparency of criteria, and self-promotion as favouring the male academic, in addition to the commonly invoked academic workload balance.

Marianna Fotaki (2013), writing from an organisational perspective, attributes differential rates of career progressions across the genders to the structural inequalities common within society and within the family (a view supported by Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Fox, 2005; Long, Scott, Paul & McGinnis, 1993; Reskin, 2003) and promotional decisions within the academy that favour men over women (a view shared with Falkenberg, 2003). She offers evidence, too, that marriage and child rearing also negatively affect women's productivity (Probert, 2005; Long, Scott, Paul & McGinnis, 1993) again impacting on career progression, too. Fotaki (2013) examines the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva to frame her discussion of the demands academic life makes on women. She reviews existing literature before claiming that 'there are virtually no studies on how women live within the supposedly universal masculine symbolic order of academia' (ibid:1253). It is this situation that our paper intends to address. We offer, here, material that illuminates how we, as female academics, find ways to "live" within a masculinised environment; how we modify the workplace to make it better fit our value system. In doing this we risk being seen as 'too caring or relational' (Fletcher, 2001:9), even as 'ineffective' (Carlson and Crawford, 2011:371) (both in Bevan and Learmonth, 2012:140) and could be accused of failing to 'confront the dilemmas of unfair subtle practices that are unspoken but have insidious effects' (ibid:154) but at least we are trying to 'behave differently' (Stanley and Wise, 1993:133) rather than merely conform.

Our focus is on collaboration and mutual support, so this paper differs significantly from those that focus on performativity (Perriton, 1999; Sinclair, 2007; Swan, 2005). We are, all three, parents of young adults and motherhood is part of our core identity, a part that 'closely determines [our] moral and social standing' (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards 2011:134; in Cooper and Rogers, 2015:3). In adopting a 'caring' stance we acknowledge that we draw upon our experiences of 'mothering' but disagree that this must be 'predicated on a naïve but seductive humanist view of individual will and agency' (Perriton, 1999, in Swan, 2005:320). We seek to make *our* working lives palatable not just to support our students. However, we recognise that the energy expended on 'ameliorating' the system could be more profitably used to further our

careers if the system were different. We see a distinctive cultural difference between the masculinist tradition of the university *per se* and the caring tradition common to the disciplines in which we work.

We anticipate that whether we are freely choosing our way of working or 'conditioned' to act collaboratively could be questioned but are prepared 'to listen to reasoned argument' (Goldberg, 1993:6), and accept that the dissonance between the way we choose to work and the university's expectations could partly be attributed to basic gender distinctions. For Goldberg, the issue is clarification of the terms of engagement. As a sociologist who takes an interdisciplinary perspective on gender, he considers physiological factors alongside the social. Goldberg sees men and women as equally but differently powerful and believes that women's efficacy relies on their skilful use of feminine skills: for a woman persuasion is more useful than insistence, for a man dominance is physiologically determined. Steven Goldberg's book *Why Men Rule* falls well outside our normal range of literature and his views are controversial (see the Internet) if well received in the American Press where they are supported by a number of eminent (but possibly Right Wing) academics in the economics/legal/public policy sectors. However, his arguments are pertinent here so are given due consideration. Moreover, it seems likely that the eminent anthropologist, Margaret Mead, endorsed some of Goldberg's claims. We have been unable to trace the complete review to judge it for ourselves, but the cover of *Why Men Rule* carries a partial quotation that starts with '…persuasive and accurate.' and continues with a claim that 'men have always been the leaders in public affairs…'; a statement that can clearly be related to the University as a public space.

In terms of choice, we consider, too, Sen's discussions as part of the Capability Approach. Hazel has used this framework extensively and, consequently, we are all familiar with his ideas. Sen (1999), at times writing with feminist Martha Nussbaum, (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993), considers how 'choice' can be offered through public policy. He sets out the philosophical position that it is people's 'beings' and 'doings' that matter, the life they can lead (Sen, 1987). We see this as a vital motivational factor. Sen and Nussbaum adopt the notion of 'preference' to express choice, and describe restricted options that go unchallenged as 'adaptive preferences'. We accept that, for women, the masculinist traditions within the university seriously curtail their freedom to choose but this does not imply a lack of awareness. This debate is relevant when we discuss the negative aspects of our choices but first we need to look at the dissonance between university expectations and those of the early years discipline whose practices we endorse.

Masculinist traditions in the University

University *man*agement promotes an objective rationalist discourse, controlled through a range of rigid and impersonal rules and regulations (Knights and Richards, 2003). It seeks to apply 'a prefabricated system of understandings, concepts and categories' (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2005:77). In their will to 'master' the world and make it more comprehensible, followers of a rational discourse commit a totalitarian act as they 'grasp' the 'Other' and reduce it to the 'Same', to use Levinas's terms (1989). In essence the practices that endorse uniformity and conformity seek to banish doubt, to simplify complexity, to enable predictability. In applying the discourses of equality and transparency rationalists attribute 'fairness' to

such objectivity, lending the practices further credibility. Yet it is possible to reposition this neutrality as weak rather than strong, a retreat from the real world rather than an engagement with it, an avoidance of diversity and ambiguity, a collective effort to build and defend a normative position rather than make the commitment to detailed comparison and justification, implicit in more flexible judgements. We would argue that when we act outside the system we effectively disempower it.

Another key aspect of masculine dominance within the university, clusters around arenas of academic practice and it not only female academics like us who struggle with the imbalances these create. It was a male sociologist, David Morgan who focused on the competitive aspects of the discourse introducing the notion of 'academic *machismo*' in 1981 (p.101). Morgan claimed that the arenas of practice within academia – the seminars, conferences and scholarly exchanges in journals – exist to enable [masculine] competition for a publicly acknowledged dominance. Thus, while 'objectivity' allows the setting of seemingly unequivocal rules and goals, competitive practices enable a clear ranking of winners and losers. The goal of education shifts from a means of providing the majority of students with the learning and skills they need for life to the more exclusionary purpose of accrediting superiority to those who can outperform their peers. If one accepts that 'greater male competitiveness' (or dominance tendency) is 'rooted in male physiology' (as Goldberg argues, 1993:66) it follows that, through these practices, the University system favours the competitive male over the caring female. But perhaps we should deviate a moment, and consider further the historical contexts that support the use of a phrase like 'caring female', before we consider how broader social structures confirm such gender inequalities and see how, as women academics, we seek to restore the balance by what Goldberg (ibid:11) would term 'getting around' the system to 'get our way' rather than challenging it directly. In doing this we seek to emphasise ' the positive, power-engendering aspects of femininity' by colluding to (wo)*man*age the masculinist system.

The female caring tradition

In contrast to the masculine regime of the university, the domestic sphere of the home is characterised as a place of caring, of warmth and empathy, of nurture and emotional nourishment, a place where the individual and his/her individual actions and thoughts matter. As Arlie Hochschild (1995:331) clearly identified, the ideal of care is 'linked with things feminine, private, natural', and this alignment is so universally accepted that 'caring' maternal images are promoted and exploited for their commercial value in selling domestic goods.

The gendered division of labour in the family (Davidoff and Hall, 1987) is still much debated but whether the reasons for this are seen as fundamentally biological (see Goldberg, 1993), as economic and political (see Engels, 1884) or as social and performative (see Butler, 1990) the earlier constructs of 'private' and 'public spheres continue to be used, and often to imply that in early urban society women's activities were relegated to the home. However, feminist historians claim that a closer analysis enables a more subtle interpretation. Mary Hilton and Pam Hirsch (2000:2) believe that gendered boundaries were more fluid than was traditionally thought, the division between the private and public spheres more nuanced. From analyses of 'real' women's lives using ephemeral sources like diaries and letters rather than the public

documents more commonly used to research the past, it appears that the middle class family home was the 'centre of operations' for a variety of philanthropic activities rather than a confining place for wives and mothers (ibid:2). Women were encouraged to take their caring skills into the wider community to help the poor and needy and to educate the young. Indeed, early philosophers of education modelled their pedagogies for infants on maternal interactions. From the seventeenth century onwards – male philosophers (eg: Comemius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel) and female (Wollstonecraft) viewed education for the young as women's work derived from mother-child interactions (see Luff and Kanyal, 2015; Wright, 2015).

In contemporary society, practices common within the home continue to be carried into vocational training and the workplace (Colley, 2006; Vincent and Braun, 2011; Wright, 2011) and there are also calls for a re-conceptualisation of professionalism within the early years (eg: Osgood, 2006) to value emotional capital (Reay, 2000). Perhaps it is to be expected then, that as female staff who work within a University Department of Education, with research and teaching interests focused on would-be early years practitioners and primary teachers, we lean towards a more 'caring ethic' than is normally observed within Higher Education. When we work together collaboratively to ameliorate conditions in our workplace we see ourselves to be acting supportively, circumventing the excesses of the system rather than undermining it. However, historians Hilton and Hirsch (2000:2) warn of the dangers in pursuing such policies. The many early leading women educationists who 'variously negotiated, expanded and subverted the roles traditionally allowed them' escaped the constraining influence of patriarchal political, religious and educational establishments, only to find that they had effectively traded status as the 'moral guardians' of the local community for formal 'rights' as citizens at national level. In pursuing short-term improvements, we should not neglect the concerted efforts needed to change the system.

There is a growing understanding that matters of the private and personal have public significance (Philip, Rogers and Weller, 2013) and that the division of the spheres is not only nuanced, but an oversimplification of reality. Women (and increasingly growing numbers of men) occupy both domains and it is all too easy for the enjoyable 'integration' of family, education and workplace captured by Hazel Wright (2011) to give way to the stressful 'juggling' more commonly encountered among women students entering higher education (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Burke, 2002; Brown and Watson, 2010). Yet this stress is seldom acknowledged within the university where rules and deadlines are rigorously applied regardless of students' personal commitments. It is only when stress manifests as a medical problem that extensions are granted. We understand why this is so, but 'feel' the lack of empathy in the official systems, and this further encourages us to ameliorate its consequences when possible to defy the masculine expectations of neutrality and competition. Whether we operate as mother, teacher or researcher, our practices embody a similar ethic of care. We reject the wearing of 'different' hats to enable a separation of caring and professional roles. Like earlier educators we are taking the practices common within the home into broader society. Unlike them, we at least command a salary; society has changed in some respects. A neo-liberal economy rewards activity – people are paid for their labour – but such monetary transactions take place without an ethics of care.

Broader social structures: the Neoliberal State
The neo-liberal state is driven by market forces and within it education becomes a route to employability rather than a public good (Burke and Crozier, 2014). This significantly changes students' expectations of the teaching and learning experience, placing the emphasis on accreditation rather than learning for its own sake. Neo-liberal policy is premised on competition, too (Olssen and Peters, 2005), one of the underpinning masculine characteristics already identified, and competitiveness demands measurement. In an educational context this means formal and impartial assessment, ranking by outcome, and rules and regulations to ensure fair play – the masculinist practices through which (as we have already seen) the university system operates. In the competitive contemporary world, survival of the fittest reappears in economic guise and this brings with it the quality agenda as this is the framework through which the 'fittest' is identified.

The quality agenda relies on *man*agerialist practices, defined by Christopher Pollit (1990) as 'a set of beliefs and practices, at the core of which burns the seldom tested assumption that better management will prove an effective solvent for a wide range of economic and social ills' (in Trowler, 2003:198). Originating in the business world, *man*agerialism focuses on 'economy, efficiency and effectiveness' (Hughes and Lewis, 1998:337) and how these can be captured, monitored and improved. These 'three Es' carry strong gendered connotations: as Gordon Hughes and Gail Lewis, 1998 also claim, *man*agerialism is 'an ideology, not as a set of neutral techniques'. Introduced into education through the 1988 Education Reform Act at the insistence of commercial stakeholders reforms rapidly spread into other sectors. In HE, increasing accountability has encouraged a growing administrative infrastructure, making compliance easier to enforce. With student fees at £9,000 per year, dissatisfaction is instantly voiced and some would argue, encouraged. Students dutifully complete surveys and evaluations, grabbing the 'tell us' complaint forms that line the corridors even before things go really wrong. Frequently receiving and responding to feedback and complaints, adds to the pressures on academic staff. In mutual self-defence, collegiate female staff become 'loyal' listeners, learning to absorb wrath directed at colleagues to dissipate it. If a student is 'heard', this can prevent an issue from spiralling out of control with consequences disproportionate to the initial problem. But the process of amelioration can significantly add to our collective workloads. Sending a student away 'happy' takes much longer than letting one leave 'angry', especially when there is no clear problem to address.

The constant feedback culture is supported by a full complement of monitoring strategies – *man*datory CPD, teaching observations, annual appraisals, workload balancing, activity tracking, and centralised data systems – demands for compliance sent out to all with a single click of the mouse. It is within this culture of 'panoptic surveillance' (Broadfoot, 1999) that women academics (and staff in general) function or 'perform' and that many women challenge an unquestioning acceptance and application of masculine values and assumptions. There have to be better ways of working.

Challenges to the universal application of masculine structures
Some challenges to the dominant masculine traditions have had a practical basis. Radical adult educators, steeped in the tradition of supporting the disadvantaged in society, have consistently ameliorated the rigid structures governing educational

establishments by employing what Johnson (1988:29) calls 'counter-educational element[s]'. These focus around curriculum and pedagogic practice. The teacher or lecturer finds ways of 'minimising the pressures of assessments and requirements, engaging student's real interests, inciting self-education'. Such activities are based on compromise, modifying expectations rather than challenging them directly as they 'run against the grain of dominant individualism' (ibid:29) and this conceptualisation is a useful one when considering changes that are implementable within the classroom. Boud and Walker (2002:98) recommend that lecturers deliberately create safe spaces for reflectivity or 'enclaves that have features separate from dominant cultural influences' and we believe that this notion of 'protective enclave' can be more generally applied to describe how a lecturer – or group of lecturers – can create a safe space to shield students from too-close-contact with an unforgiving system that could leave them bruised and bewildered.

Other challenges have been more academically orientated. Working in an American context, Mary F. Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger, and Jill M. Tarule (1997/86) impugned the inappropriate identification of masculine learning behaviour as universal. Their study of *Women's Ways of Knowing*, directly challenged the application of William G. Perry's epistemological 'positions' to women students in 1987, and due to its iconic status this was republished without significant change in 1997 in a tenth anniversary edition. The book highlighted how a male bias underpins views of truth and knowledge in higher education institutions, and as Paulette Luff (2013) noted, how these often omit the relevance of women's life experiences. The British educational system was (and is) equally ready to dismiss 'intuitive' knowledge as more primitive and 'therefore, less valuable than so-called objective modes of knowing' (Belenky et al, 1997:6). Mary Belenky and her colleagues found, too, that 'many female students and working women' had difficulty in 'getting and holding the attention of others' (ibid:5) and this comes as no surprise to British academics like us. As in the USA, British educational establishments were 'originally founded by men for the education of men' (ibid:5) and women still live and work with the consequences of this. Men traditionally held powerful positions and some are reluctant to relinquish this dominant position, leaving women to challenge their supremacy outright or to 'collude' to 'chip' away at it, as in our study.

Another key discourse that appeared to challenge the masculine tradition has largely been absorbed within the dominant frame. Early in the new millennium, Frank Furedi (2003) stirred up a moral panic (Cohen, 1972) around the **therapeutic culture**, an issue taken up by Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes (2009) and further explored by Carole Leathwood and Barbara Read (2009) among others. Within HE the therapeutic culture was seen to manifest as a rise in student support services, and Furedi's arguments led to fears that the establishment of such services constituted a process of feminisation. However, Student Services inhabits a defined place within the system and operates as a separate sub-culture within the masculinised framework. It offers support to prevent outright student failure but this is closely controlled by rules and regulations and the provision is limited, albeit with occasional drop-in facilities. It could be argued that in softening the interfaces, the university is deflecting challenges to its fundamental systems rather than changing its approach. In a later study analysing the visual imagery used to portray the contemporary university, Carole Leathwood (2013:150) found that these continue to inscribe a

dominant masculine culture: perhaps, the aphorism that 'pictures speak louder than words' has validity here.

Before we present and discuss our own experiences we need to offer you, the reader, some insights into our 'ways of working'. This is not a carefully bounded practice nor does the explanation offered here lend itself to a systematic linear discussion using the headings common to empirical studies. Our practices, as teachers and researchers are closely interwoven, and our methodological approach to this study is itself as a means of exemplifying and understanding our way of working. To fit our collaborative research and writing into a busy and rigid masculine structure and address the notion of 'collusion' afresh, we have had to think flexibly and innovatively and develop a new 'way of working', an asynchronous and associative form of individual or 'auto' inquiry that breaches the normal expectations for working within a shared configuration of time and space.

Developing a 'way of working': AAA/I Asynchronous Associative Auto/Inquiry
The initial plan was for Hazel, Linda and Paulette to meet and hold a mini-focus group or three-way interview in order to collect specific ideas about how we collaborate to ameliorate conditions for ourselves and for our students. We wanted to explore our practices together rather than simply offer anecdotal evidence. However, time and travel constraints (we work across two main campuses that are 45 miles apart) continually prevented us arranging this. We are all three busy academics, managing other teaching and research commitments, administrative tasks and family lives and rarely were we timetabled to be in close proximity at the same time with spare capacity to carry out our research. We were able to hold planning meetings to discuss the literature and structure of our paper but not sit down to hold our major data collection meeting so needed to formulate an alternative approach. Our email exchanges, part of the data of collaboration, clearly outline the need for this.

> L: It would be useful if we could decide between us a set timeframe, as we are all busy with other projects and I am also off on leave shortly to look at universities around the UK with [son].
>
> H: Cannot prioritise … until the [summer] school, [conference] booking, [internal] application, financial claims for visitors at least, …marking, …student queries, etc etc are underway.
>
> P: I have made a start, too … once the [panel] reviews are done and the timetable changes in then I will … add a little more.

Aware of the deadline, with the article much discussed but still only in draft, we developed a new inquiry approach, building on the premise that, like autoethnography, narrative inquiry is both process and product (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

Hazel proposed that we each individually responded to an open question, adopting a semi-autoethnographic approach to gather our thoughts:

> "How do we collaboratively (wo)manage our work and the masculinist university systems to make life better for ourselves and our students?"

Rather than just sharing our narrative accounts we would see ourselves as the competent and practiced researchers that we are, and trust ourselves to play a participant self-researcher role (the *autobiographical inquiry)*. We would carry out a preliminary thematic and linguistic analysis of our own accounts, identify the vignettes and quoted evidence needed to support our claims, and share our writings and analyses so that we could then write our collaborative account. In taking this approach we hoped to bring together a collection of meaningful ('soundbites' or 'iconic') statements but avoid spending time we did not have transcribing material and interpreting the views of the 'other'. With this methodological approach, we would be able to proceed *asynchronously* to a stage where we could collectively sort the data to find the commonalities and differences, the illustrative examples, and the instances where we independently offered alternative perspectives on the same activities. This is *associative* working but it could also be argued that our approach is truly polyvocal. At the time of data collection we were not in direct communication as we would have been in an interview.

As a process it is the data collection and data reduction methods that make AAA/I distinctive. For clarity, it may be useful to set out the multiple stages we employed. The process started collaboratively. We held an initial face-to-face discussion to determine a research overview, and took our ideas for refinement to the *Women's Writing Workshop.* Thus, together, we shaped the discourse into an overarching question that each contributor could address alone. Next we worked individually to avoid collusion or an artificial early channelling of the data. Each participant undertook a creative and a critical stage. The creative stage was a reflective one with the participant challenging herself to respond as fully as possible to the question, making her responses concrete by providing anecdotal evidence for any actions described. Thus the initial research was narrative-led. For the critical stage, each participant adopted a researcher perspective, assessing her own material for meaning and suitability, removing the irrelevant and embellishing the usable, and identifying relevant theoretical points and literature. This allowed each of us to take responsibility for the quality of our own offering and ensured that views were clearly articulated to make later analysis more accurate and time-efficient. Finally, we entered a shared analysis stage steered by Hazel, as lead author. She carried out a preliminary analysis to identify shared themes, returning the material to Paulette and Linda to elicit their agreement and/or modifications. Hazel then drafted a text for joint editing from research data, mindful of our shared agreements. Working collectively and iteratively, we next built up the literature review, and revised the discussion and conclusions until, in principle, we were happy with what we had achieved (and time ran out).

This 'way of working' has worked well for us, and AAA/I (named to honour Liz Stanley's seminal 1992 work, *The Auto/biographical I)* offers another way of 'getting around' the masculinist system when rigid time frames make face-to-face collaboration difficult. Our approach is justifiable in philosophical terms. Feminist philosopher, Sara Ruddick (1989/90:15) clearly states that: 'Thinking itself is often a solitary activity' but: 'Individuals, nonetheless make sense of their activities to themselves by means of concepts and values that are developed socially'. She sees the language of solitary thinking to be 'necessarily public in the sense that it is governed

by public criteria of meaning and truth' and claims that a particular way of thinking depends on 'the community of participants in which it arises'. She specifies the cooperative form of thinking to be 'the dialogue or conversation, not the chorus'. Our approach meets these criteria for we started by thinking individually, created a written record, and continued by analysing our ideas within a community of participants using socially developed concepts and values. Through email and dropbox we ensured our subsequent analysis was cooperative (in our terms, associative).

So, our research methodology is justifiable in terms of process, and in itself becomes a meta-example of a 'way of working' to (wo)*man*age our schedules. However, the process also identified a significant number of other examples that we should now consider.

Ways of (wo)*man*aging the University

We started the analysis of our auto/inquiries by looking at the themes we had identified within the literature and were interested to find that despite our known concerns about **the masculinist tradition** in which we worked, we said very little about them in our texts, discussing instead the possibilities to change them. Linda mentions 'rigid academic regulations', the need to 'meet business goals' and 'the squeeze of the neoliberal model'. Paulette described the 'teacher-led top-down approach, where knowledge is imparted and the focus is on strategic learning, meeting outcomes and assessment criteria' and wanted this 'hidden curriculum' modified to match the early years pedagogy that we teach. She also mentioned 'consumerist approaches such as module evaluations and NSS' and drew attention to another telling dissonance, a former colleague she saw as 'a wonderful leader … was not fully appreciated by the university'. Hazel, too, thinks in terms of amelioration, talking of:

> 'rewriting the learning objectives to make them maximally flexible,… humanising the learning objectives by making them module specific,… and relaxing the rules on writing objectively in the passive voice and past tense'

These exemplify what Paulette means by 'bending the rules slightly' but note that it is:

> 'becoming increasingly difficult to bend rules slightly, though, to make life easier for ourselves and for students because of stronger (we could say harsher) monitoring and accountability'.

In terms of **competitiveness** our discourse is even more oblique. Hazel advocates the opposite approach 'anonymously sharing former student's experiences so that current students do not make the same mistakes'. Linda describes collegiality instead:

> 'We support each other to go for promotions and apply for sabbaticals, in order to find space to engage in our research interests and write for publications. We often present at conferences or publish together, to encourage each other to both contribute and remain knowledgeable in our research fields'.

Paulette offers an interesting vignette that shows how rarely among early years staff collegiality is breeched.

> ‘It was when a person came into the team who was motivated very strongly by personal ambition and was far less prepared to join in the team way of working that I realised that what we have is so important – and yet it can be perceived as weakness, as this person didn’t have much regard at all for our experience and established ways of working. It shocked me, too, that someone would enhance her own position (and self-confidence) by colluding with students to make negative comments about colleagues. It made me very grateful for the deeply trusting relationships I have with my other colleagues.’

More commonly the discourse is one of cooperation and **collaboration** and this is evident in our choice of language. A brief analysis reveals that Paulette talks about, co-creation, mutual aid, common goals, persuading, volunteering, equal footings, and things being relational and coactive: Hazel mentions sharing, representing, swapping, accepting and commiserating; Linda favours support, [being] sensitive, consideration and encouraging each other.

The **caring** ethos is clearly present in our texts and it is apparent that we often make significant links to our personal lives when teaching, inadvertently following the practices of our forebears. For Hazel caring is implicit in her actions when she enables students to ‘write coherent projects on any topic they like rather than worrying about omitting minor points of content’ and more generally, in ‘commiserating when things go wrong, rather than gloating’. Linda describes ‘students who are keen to be there because they know you care’ and for Linda caring is construed as empathising:

> ‘I think as a mother who was a mature student, raising children whilst studying, I strongly empathise with their situation. I understand the difficulty of juggling being ‘mum’ and ‘me’.

She explains it is important sometimes to ‘switch hats’ and this is something she and Chrissie Rogers have written about previously (Cooper and Rogers, 2015) drawing on Gail Letherby’s (2003) view that this makes participants feel more secure. There is a parallel here with Hazel’s decision to ‘bring examples from my own life and experiences into the classroom when teaching child development to reassure students that my own children are not models of perfection’. Paulette also brings her personal experiences into the educational setting, admitting that:

> ‘there is also an aspect of maternalism in my attitude towards students – when I first started at the university I definitely had a maternal attitude towards undergraduates and, now that my own children and their friends are older, it extends to postgraduates too!’

Writing with a colleague, Mallika Kanyal (Luff and Kanyal, 2015) she has drawn significant links between a ‘care-full’ pedagogy – one that looks out for students’ safety and well-being, fostering their academic development and enabling their social acceptance in our field (in practice and academic terms) and Sara Ruddick’s (1989/90) ideas of maternal thinking.

We describe further practical ways to support our students, making it possible to justify a claim that our classrooms (and our staffroom) are ‘**protective enclaves’** (Boud and

Walker, 2002). Linda, as a relatively recent mature student, recognises that many students have children to drop off and pick up around classes and tries through her mannerisms to 'alleviate the stress of walking into the classroom after the lecture has begun' and turns a blind eye to students leaving early 'to do the school run'. These are issues that Hazel acknowledges, too, seeking timetabling changes for 'classes late in the afternoon and early morning'. That Paulette, longest in post, talks of changing the 'imposed timetable' offers a hint about how difficult this can be when human activity is managed by electronic systems (and a series of gatekeepers wanting cost-effective solutions). As Paulette says elsewhere in her text: 'A "people-before-profit" approach doesn't fit in very well!'.

Linda timetables reading weeks during half-term so that students with children can work (or not work) from home. She offers informal tutorials during these scheduled slots so that students who feel the need for additional support can benefit from some small group or individual tuition. Interestingly she feels the need to justify this as 'more economical' since students with no childcare in place will not attend anyway. She also frames her decision as 'a way that supports their individual needs, not a loss of professional values'. This reminds us how the masculinist regime is deeply embedded in our psyche, a referent for everything we do. Linda is mindful of regulations too when she mentions students' children occasionally attending their parents' individual tutorial sessions as something to allow 'if you are happy' as 'they are not supposed to be there for any period of time'. Hazel, who has taught many entire semesters in Further Education with a student's new baby over one shoulder to stop it crying, is much more relaxed about this, casually 'allowing off-school children to sit and crayon during tutorial sessions' but the tone of this comment is a light-hearted one rather than a thought-through response.

The University clearly relegates children to the private sphere. Linda tells how a pregnant student with a due date five days prior to hand-in asked for an extension and was told that there was no cause as normal pregnancy is not a medical problem. The University caters for pregnancy by allowing intermission but the student did not want to lose a semester's attendance, she just wanted some space in which to juggle her commitments. Linda championed her cause, sought support at a very senior level and the student was granted a further fortnight to hand in her work. In this instance the masculinised system was challenged and changed (at least for one student). There is an irony that the alternative, 'getting around' the system (Goldberg, 1993:11), would have required the student to medicalise the problem. As mothers ourselves, we anticipate that most GPs would have readily issued a letter to confirm that the situation was causing the student unacceptable stress.

Hazel suggests further ways to ameliorate the student experience without challenging the regulations. She mentions using 'patchwork texts' (a model she learned from Paulette) to enable students 'to use their own experiences and reflections to humanise the word count'. The patchwork text is an idea developed by Richard Winter (2003) among others, that enables assessment through a series of linked but separate tasks brought together in a final reflective 'stitching piece'. The patchwork enables multi-stranded assessment but also allows students to write some elements in advance of the final deadline. They can complete each task as ready. Hazel also talks of using presentations and posters to 'bring assessment forward and away from Christmas and School half-terms – absorb some of the word count'.

Linda comments that we could 'mobilise our use of technology … to provide outreach'. This is undeniably a means of increasing student support – and in a way that the University actively encourages. Commenting beyond our texts – this is something that Paulette embraces and Hazel tries to minimise. She prefers to offer additional face-to-face support, feeling that email makes her accessible even during those precious times when she can take time to think or write. For Hazel, the protective enclave must be a bounded one and stay within the classroom, if possible. As a former adult educator, she has been mindful of this concept through many years of teaching in the community. She has also worked as a freelance editor. In such roles, it is necessary to set and enforce boundaries, to cultivate a 'private sphere' to secure any personal space. As an advocate of biographic research methods, like Carol Smart (2007) she continually excavates data from 'personal life', so normatively constructs safe boundaries for everything she does, yet frequently breeches these. She reports weekend working by mobile phone with occasional students who are struggling to complete due to major personal problems. For the sake of student anonymity, we will just list the issues as family illness, bereavement, re-location and newly diagnosed dyslexia.

Paulette discusses how the Early Years staffroom becomes a 'protective enclave' for colleagues who support each other through difficult times but again, to maintain confidentiality, we will publicly record only her generalised but heartfelt comment:

> 'The team has also been invaluable at some very sad and difficult times – when members were faced with redundancies, shock bereavements and their own and family illnesses – it would be difficult (maybe impossible) to keep going without one another's spoken and unspoken support.

For all of us flexibility, sharing work informally according to our strengths and capacity, and mutual support are key to 'finding the head space to write' (as Linda says). For Hazel, geographical location is an issue, too, as she is based on a different campus. Willingness matters here. Being prepared to 'step up to help' (Linda) and 'doing what has to be done rather than refusing to take on more' (Hazel). The challenge of how to do this *and* set boundaries is an issue we face daily. Paulette offers a positive vignette (but note that it is not a current one) that shows how flexible working can create a win-win situation. She invokes Carol Munn-Giddings' adaptation of the notion of mutual aid. This occurs in informally constituted self-help groups but the focus is on the 'unique quality of mutual support' (Munn-Giddings and McVicar, 2006) Such groups rely on 'experiential knowledge and peer reciprocity' as 'mutuality replaces dependency on professional care'. It is also apposite to note that such efficacy supports attitudinal change and provides health-related benefits (Seebohm et al, 2013:392). As Paulette recalls it, the vignette sounds very supportive.

> 'When I started at the university the early childhood team was very small and there were two female colleagues who both wanted different working patterns – one who aspired to more time for writing and research and the other who had a long commute and a husband who was ill – they worked together so that they covered classes to give one another alternating light weeks and heavier teaching weeks. That's a real example of mutual aid – people working together to make their lives better.'

Among us, it is Paulette too who offers a vision, through specific examples, of what a woman's way of working should be. Moving beyond a gendered discourse, she describes 'a good academic life' as one where 'intellectual stimulation and co-creation of knowledge' are paramount. She offers detailed vignettes of departmental conferences where the 'team worked together so smoothly', motivated by 'a genuine interest in the topic' that broke 'down the barriers between what was known in academia and the knowledge from practice'. She also describes our colleague, Mallika's work in developing an Early Childhood Resource Room. Mallika is carrying our participatory research and her project enables academics and students to engage 'on an equal footing'. In an unequivocal rejection of the neo-liberal view of education, Paulette wants students to 'be our fellow scholars and not our customers'. For all of us, it is the collaborative relationships that make learning and teaching rewarding. Linda talks of a 'happy classroom environment' when students want to be there, Hazel mentions that sharing doctoral teaching makes sessions 'fun rather than work'. Paulette's text is laced with the language of reciprocity.

This all sounds very positive and we reiterate that this paper has deliberately focused on the positive ways in which we work. However, we do not deny that our opportunities are constrained. We know that as mothers and female academics we are doubly disadvantaged. Not only are women long under-represented in senior posts in academia (Morley, 1999) but 'feminine' roles from outside professional life (marriage and motherhood, probably caring in general) also affect women negatively (Probert, 2005). Revising this paper - a year later - it is timely to reflect on what this means and, rather than pick out individual instances of grievance or dissatisfaction we choose to identify the difficulties in terms of career decisions.

We have to admit that making the additional effort to create our own working environment rather than merely work within one that is supportive takes its toll in terms of stress, but more commonly simple fatigue. In the changing higher education environment, all three of us find it increasingly difficult to continue to match the energy levels required to function as lecturers the way we would want to. This is partly a result of the massification of higher education (Hornsby and Osman, 2014). More students mean more individualised support particularly with universities needing a successful outcome to the National Student Survey. Yet, as Mihalis Giannakis and Nicola Bullivant (2016) found, this rarely equates with better support for academic staff: lower teaching loads, more focused responsibilities, job progression opportunities that value involvement with students. The repositioning of the student as a customer also plays a role in increasing demands, as students relate higher fees to better provision. The student who quipped: 'I'd be expecting caviar in lectures and stuff like that' (Bates and Kay, 2013:668) is possibly atypical in her verbal agility but not in terms of the view expressed.

For us, what ultimately matters is our 'being and doing', the 'life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be' (Sen, 1987:16). This implies a focus on the present wellbeing but does not preclude future aspirations. We want to be able to achieve our potential (capability) and achieve new levels of functioning. We want the freedom to choose our own destinies. Yet, we have each recognised the danger of burnout and are making choices that, in the short term at least, favour work-life balance over career progression. Hazel clearly sees this to be significant, wanting more freedom to read, research, and write. She finds the student-as-consumer very

demanding, the naivety draining. How do you respond when – ignoring overheads and wanting 'caviar' – students calculate your hourly value at £100 and ask on first meeting (albeit in a jocular manner) whether the forthcoming session will be worth this? Hazel finds the focus on outcomes – the continual pursuit of a First or 2:1 rather than knowledge itself – alien to her beliefs about the purpose of education. As a consequence, Hazel has elected to become a visiting fellow, able to choose her own activities. She pursues her research and writing independently, supervises doctoral students and teaches occasionally in Europe where expectations differ. This is a decision to enjoy life now rather than manage competing demands in the hope of a professorship one day. Linda, much younger, has made a decision to move from senior lecturer and BA course leader to a lower paid but very rewarding position in a research institute. She now works in an area that readily acquires funding, enjoys semi-regular hours and trusts that hard work and commitment will eventually lead to further career progression. Paulette has to consider the immediate consequences of her choices more carefully as she occupies an intermediate position on the age/career spectrum. She is still working as a senior lecturer, still striving to 'tick all boxes' like Ann in Fotaki's 2013 paper. As her career progresses she is acquiring more involvement in research projects and it remains to be seen whether 'buy-out' from teaching will be effective, enabling her to manage the demands on her time without undue pressure. When stressed, she dreams about reducing her hours but agonises over what she would give up as she genuinely likes research and teaching equally and this – in itself a really positive position – constitutes a major dilemma when seeking to maintain a viable work-life balance.

Collectively, we recognise that our career decisions are affected by the changing educational environment. We understand that, *as* female academics, *as* wives *and* mothers, it is harder (and growing increasingly harder) for us to achieve senior roles where we might have greater control of our work schedules, perhaps the chance to specialise. In Sen's terms we are making choices but our preferences could be construed 'adaptive' for we choose from a set that is restricted by organisational structures within the university and in society; and in Britain these are highly divisive in terms of gender, class and ethnicity (Archer and Leathwood, 2003). The recent Brexit decision brought social divisions to the fore and will probably exacerbate them as the anticipated funding cuts offer little hope of a sudden reduction in competitive masculinist traditions.

Conclusion

Together, we have examined our belief that the University remains a masculinist institution despite at least half of its students and staff being female, and we have drawn upon a broader literature and our own experiences to consider how this can be ameliorated. Rather than rely on random recall to support our reading, we determined to research our experience. We devised and used AAC/I, an asynchronous associative auto-inquiry methodology, to capture our independent thoughts prior to analysing and sharing these, to see whether or not we agreed, and to identify the ideas that mattered. This proved a productive experience; being able to work independently enabled us to carry out our activities alongside heavy work schedules. We created a range of written texts that proved suitable for thematic and holistic analysis, deriving significant meaning from viewing the material as a whole and of looking first within the interview –'beyond fragments' (West, 1996) – before attempting to look across the different narratives.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that we each approached the task in different ways but on analysis it was clear that this did not significantly affect the findings. Linda set herself a pair of 'mock interviews' posing sub-questions and answering them as if in an interview; Paulette created a detailed narrative account replete with specific examples; Hazel noted significant thoughts separately, making a list of points to embellish or codify. Overall, the process demonstrated that we all clearly prefer a reciprocal 'way of working' to the regulated and competitive practices we are expected to work 'to'. Our view of education is clearly an inclusive – sometimes a collusive – one.

Our intention is writing this paper was to consider our own practices as female academics 'living' within an institutional setting that is commonly deemed to follow a masculinist tradition. This is a commentary on the vertical positioning of women within a masculine hegemony not a horizontal study comparing our practices and conditions with those of our male colleagues. It is the masculinist tradition prevalent within universities that we are challenging, not male staff, some of whom, like Sen, are perceived to have pro-feminist sympathies. If, despite careful checking, any of our statements appear stereotypical this is a consequence of the simplification and condensation of ideas rather than a deliberately hostile act. Even the esteemed writer on the ethics of care, Nel Noddings chooses 'convenience' at times, and decides to 'refer to the carer as "she", the cared-for as "he"' on occasion (Noddings, 2012:53).

Reflecting further on our texts and the shared analysis raises the issue of the interface between the imaginary world and the real one. To what extent are we evoking images of the University in past times, imagining the Ivory Tower as it never was. For any complaints we make now about 'masculinist traditions' must be minor compared to practices in earlier times when the University was an exclusively male domain. The Oxbridge tradition of 'sporting the oak' was and is a means to keep intrusion at bay, never an invitation to collaborate. Are we failing to practice what we preach if we secretly desire an acceptable electronic equivalent that advises colleagues and students that one is otherwise occupied rather than simply ignoring email contact in order to meet a deadline? An electronic diary does not really suffice as a protective barrier to new demands if one has too little time to update or consult it.

On the major issue of whether to challenge practice and push for change or instead to continue to hone our ways of working 'within the system' we remain ambivalent, for our experience shows that a great deal is achievable through minimal compliance but that in the longer term, continually reshaping the work environment is exhausting. Seeking to make sense of this ambivalence, we sought support in the literature and found this in an unlikely source. In part, Goldberg's (1993: 229) conclusion to *Why Men Rule* resonates with our own findings (but also carries a 'health warning'). He believes that: 'the evidence shows that women follow their own psychophysiological imperatives and that they would not choose to compete for the goals that men devote their lives to attaining. Women have more important things to do.' Unfortunately, he then sheds caution and claims, that if women refuse male protection they will have to 'meet men on male terms' and that they 'will lose' (ibid:229). This is a statement intended to provoke reaction but unlikely to win support from a feminist audience. It offers a challenge and makes us reflect that perhaps through processes of attrition, through generational change, and through sheer force of numbers we *will* change

society. If the growing number of female staff and students in universities harness their ability to work together for the common good this could be a significant driver for change.

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