



Reflection / Huritau

The gendered role of pastoral care within tertiary education institutions: An autoethnographic reflection during COVID-19

Rhona Winnington^{1,2}, RN, PhD, Senior Lecturer, School of Clinical Sciences

Catherine Cook¹, RN, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Clinical Sciences

¹Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

²Corresponding Author: rhona.winnington@aut.ac.nz

Citation

Winnington, R., & Cook, C. (2021). The gendered role of pastoral care within tertiary education institutions. *Nursing Praxis in Aotearoa New Zealand*, 37(3), 37-40.
<https://doi.org/10.36951/27034542.2021.033>

Abstract

Emerging research highlights that the pandemic has exacerbated gendered inequities for academic women. These disparities prior to COVID-19 included a significant gender pay gap, and women channelled into administrative, teaching, and pastoral care roles that are not recognised with career advancement and remuneration compared to research routes much more readily facilitated for and by male colleagues. Using a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach we reflect on our experiences of emotional labour in supporting nursing students throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and the invisibility of this crucial work within academia. We noted that the patriarchal construction of academia remains present and highly visible to the detriment of many female career trajectories.

Keywords: academia; COVID-19; emotional labour; faculty; gendered division of labour; pastoral care; women

Background

Emerging research highlights that the pandemic has exacerbated gendered inequities for academic women. These disparities prior to COVID-19 included a significant gender pay gap, and women channelled into administrative, teaching, and pastoral care roles that are not recognised with career advancement and remuneration compared to research routes much more readily facilitated for and by male colleagues (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019). Despite small gains in women's paid employment and equity initiatives within academia, the ingrained rhetoric of gendered labour divisions is perpetuated within these institutions (O'Hagan et al, 2019; Yildirim & Eslenziya, 2020). The patriarchal structure of tertiary education institutions, combined with the reduced agency of women academics, creates a duplicitous situation; academic marketing draws attention to the availability of quality teaching and pastoral care yet those who provide this emotionally laborious work are undervalued (Rickett & Morris, 2020). This institutional reproduction of traditional, gendered power hierarchies reflects a subtle symbolic violence

towards women academics through expectations placed on them to provide (unrewarded) pastoral care to students (Bourdieu, 2001). We argue that analysis of this demand and its gendered implications need urgent attention as the requirement for tertiary institutions to provide pastoral care has recently been legislated (Education (Pastoral Care) Amendment Act, 2019). We consider that an ethic of care is fundamental to nursing, including role-modelling caring in relationships with colleagues and our students. Yet valuing caring and requirement to care create an irreconcilable tension for women in academia; prioritising caring risks equitable career advancement and impacts (rewarded) research aspirations and income (Malisch et al., 2020).

Gendered narratives fuel entrenched beliefs that it is a woman's place to be a caregiver both professionally and domestically, thus continuing the 'third shift' rhetoric accorded to women who seek a career beyond domesticity (Gerstel, 2000). Yet the provision of pastoral care in tertiary education is a mainstay underpinning wellbeing and retention of students (Banks et al., 2012). Evidence of the dual negative



burden of emotional labour on women academics was heightened during the first COVID-19 pandemic level four lockdown in early 2020 in Aotearoa New Zealand. Specifically, this entrenched expectation that women will provide emotional support to students as part of service roles (Angervall, 2018, Ryan et al., 2021) impacts women academics' ability to actively participate in research activities and be research productive, thus reducing the likelihood of career advancement, while simultaneously enlarging their emotional burden through increased welfare provision.

Collaborative autoethnography

A collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) approach offered the authors, two mature-aged academics, an opportunity during the first wave of COVID-19 to pool our academic pastoral care experiences as data, collected through shared conversations (Chang et al., 2013). Our overlapping experiences of supporting unprepared nursing students to foster self-care skills, while expected to perform teaching and research duties and caring for our frail older parents, presented a rich tapestry of experiential data for reflection (Hernandez et al., 2017). Collaborative autoethnography, therefore, provided a relational functionality, positioning ourselves and our data as points for self-reflection on our place in the workforce and social world (Francis & Hester, 2012).

Reflection

The service aspect of our academic positions at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 included substantial pastoral care oversight of students in our programme (undergraduate nursing students). Having only recently commenced these roles, the magnitude of the additional workload outran our job description for this supportive role while perpetuating the gendered division of academic labour. We are both in the 'sandwich generation,' with simultaneous roles as mother, teacher, caregiver, and pastoral carer, all of which can lead to emotional suffering (Brenna, 2021). We concur with Ryan et al., (2021, p. 587), that "female, feminist, and academic remain an uncomfortable fit," as caring is fundamental to societal and academic cohesion, and thriving during the pandemic, and yet is exploited (Angervall & Beach, 2020). Additionally, socially constructed ideals of feminine activity perpetuate the enduring hierarchy and inequality afforded to

women within tertiary education institutions (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). This reflected our unrewarded reality, responding to exceptionally high levels of support requested by students due to their increased anxiety.

We addressed the newly identified wellbeing needs of our large cohort of nursing students through provision of mindfulness sessions and resilience training specifically tailored to the stressors of the pandemic lockdown, together with unrelenting online support. However, this burden of gendered labour resulted in substantial pressure in our positions of academic leadership, with our work largely going unnoticed (Babcock et al., 2018). This invisibility of 'women's work' in academia results in a negative portrayal of women's contributions to the scholarship environment when compared with the more tangible outputs of male counterparts. Bourdieu's (2001) concept of 'soft power' illuminates this normalised side-lining of women, deployed at an almost unconscious level as a means of retaining the status quo of patriarchal domination in tertiary education. Thus, it is unsurprising but frustrating that our experiences of burdensome emotional toil, and the unseen and invisible burden of pastoral care goes unrecognised on both personal and professional levels and supports our argument that nothing has really changed around the gendered construct of labour in decades, despite ongoing battles.

The double burden, however, of caring at work and caring at home, resulted in us working longer hours than we would usually, thus encroaching on our family time. These inroads are noted by numerous authors (see for example Andersen et al., 2020; Jessen & Waights, 2020; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). These scholars highlight that the impact of the pandemic on caregiving duties has been disproportionately weighted towards women, measurable in reduced research outputs that directly impact promotion. Furthermore, Andersen et al. (2020) confirmed our experiences highlighting that such caregiving duties negatively impacted research productivity for women. These findings align with our experiences of caregiving both professionally and domestically, with nursing students' needs and those of our families overriding our efforts to remain competitive in the male dominant research paradigms of academic practice.

Through these constant interactions with our nursing students we noted that they too were often



experiencing similar situations. We recognised a perpetuation of the social constructs of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 1987) and increased gendered division of labour for nursing students during the pandemic (Waddell et al., 2021), thus continuing the structural gendered inequalities faced by women across multiple levels of academic reference. This multiple-role conflict (Forsyth et al., 2019) means women students negotiate study time alongside childcare arrangements which, with the added effects of the pandemic and lockdown on meeting children's needs, immediately disadvantages the women of any cohort. Thus, in a similar situation to ourselves, students often felt guilty about spending time away from the family to pursue study, whereas we were guilt ridden in having to support the very same students while also tending to the needs of our immediate family members and elders. The duplicity of this situation is not lost on us. As did Utoft (2020), we too "take issue with the premise that our productivity is the golden standard against which we and our worth should be measured while we are living through a global crisis" (p. 778).

Conclusion

The image painted by our experiences is one whereby our emotional labour, and the ongoing gendered nature of caring remains invisible to all but those immediately engaged in giving or receiving of care. Within the patriarchal construction of academia, our service is heavily relied upon to support the success of nursing students, but is simultaneously overlooked when we, as women academics, struggle to equal the scholarly outputs of our male counterparts. As such, our experiences uphold the ongoing reality of how the construct of gendered labour remains entrenched in everyday interactions (Waddell, 2021; West & Zimmerman, 1987) within academia, thus rendering the burden of emotional labour exhausting, invisible and not valued against the tangible productivity of male academics. Our experiences, therefore, suggest that the 'soft' power of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001) remains at play within academia to the detriment of women who yield to the gendered provision of care.

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Funding: None

Conflict of interest: None