

## **Academic citizenship, together: Prioritising care and reflexivity in scholarly life**

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### **Abstract**

*This essay explores dimensions of academic citizenship relating to collegiality and collectivity within academia. Building on notions of reflexivity and care, and from a starting point that highlights some of the problems of the conditions and nature of contemporary academic work, it offers a discussion of how scholars might define and interrogate values for relating to one another as colleagues. Though we focus on and discuss our own values and practices, we argue for the processual, unfinished nature of these. Academic citizenship is thus framed as a reflexive process that aims to create caring spaces within academia.*

*Keywords: academic citizenship; care; reflexivity; values; process*

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### **Introduction**

What does it take to survive and thrive in academia? How should we treat each other within it? Who is a ‘good’ academic citizen? These questions are important for any scholar working in a university or research organisation today. Implicitly or explicitly, we all have to decide how we wish to live and work in the academy—what we aim for, what behaviours we see as (un)acceptable, and how we engage with our colleagues, research communities, and the wider world. Such choices are particularly important at a moment in which academia is increasingly characterised by precarity and by neoliberal regimes that centre resources on particular versions of the academic citizen (Ball, 2012). Dynamics of ‘projectification’, increased global competition and expectations of mobility, and market-driven research and teaching (or ‘academic capitalism’; Hackett, 2014)

have combined to produce a situation where—for many scholars—a series of multiple short-term contracts is the norm, and a stable position is possible only after many years of uncertainty (if at all). While academia has always been competitive, in many countries these developments now render it intensely so (Fochler, 2016; Loveday, 2018).

At the same time these pressures are not experienced equally. In light of gendered and racialised hierarchies and inequities (Ahmed, 2012; Bagilhole, 2002; Bhambra et al., 2018), we continue to find the figure of the ‘good’ academic being imagined in ways that privilege certain bodies, qualities, and forms of academic labour (Lund, 2015). The notion of ‘excellence’ celebrates and rewards particular forms of research (the risky, the ground-breaking, the coherent) over others (the publicly engaged, the collaborative, the slow or emergent) and ignores aspects of academic practice such as teaching, care work, and administration (Sigl et al., 2020). Bullying, harassment, and other forms of abuse continue to be widely present in academic cultures—behaviours that are in part enabled by power differentials and the protection of those with scholarly prestige (Iversen & Bendixen, 2018).

In our view, it is important to consider academic citizenship in light of these issues. While the notion has largely been understood as capturing ‘service’ activities—such as participation in institutional committees or public outreach (Beatson et al., 2021)—more recent accounts of academic citizenship have suggested that it should be considered a practice through which the ‘claims, rights and entitlements’ of academic work are negotiated (Albia & Cheng, 2023, p. 10). In considering the nature of collective scholarly lives, and the intersection of gendered and other identities with possibilities for academic citizenship (Sümer, 2020), there are clear parallels with other discussions of how to live well together in a precarious and unjust academy. Recent interest in ‘research culture’ and how it affects academic work is one example of these discussions (Limas et al., 2022; Wellcome Trust, 2020), whilst there are also efforts to articulate the expectations, norms, and practices of specific academic communities. The CLEAR Lab Book (CLEAR, 2021) and RustLab’s Coding Document (RUSTLab, 2021), for instance, render mundane aspects of research visible (and discussable) and their members accountable to each other. Similarly, disciplinary communities increasingly have codes of conduct or expectations about how members should relate to each other in public. Such discussions, however, tend not to use the language of citizenship. Indeed, such language brings with it some central limitations: the assumption of a state with corresponding citizens excludes those outside of formal citizenship, as well as other forms of community that might be equally interesting models for academic life (see Hoxsey, 2011).

In this essay, we draw on these debates and experiments to suggest that a discussion of academic citizenship should include engagement with the nature of collective academic life in specific contexts. We do this by presenting and discussing a set of values that we—a Science and Technology Studies (STS) research group based at the University of Vienna, Austria—use as a guide for how we want to relate to each other. We share these not as a finished product, but rather as an example of what ongoing reflection on the practice of academic citizenship might look like.

### **About us**

As a research group, we came into being through the initial appointment of a university chair (SRD) in early 2020. She then recruited PhD students (BCP, ED, AA), post-docs (KG, AS), and student assistants (CH, EG, NE) from September 2020 onwards. Whilst we are collectively grounded in STS and have common research interests, we remain heterogeneous, with different research activities, national and disciplinary backgrounds, native languages, forms of employment, experiences of mobility, residency status, family responsibilities, career stages, and gender and other identities. With no knowledge of each other prior to our respective appointments, and coming from different university systems, we faced practical questions concerning how we wanted to interact with each other as a group. What were our expectations for activities as a collective? What did we expect of one another? These questions were particularly acute given our experiences of a diverse range of ways of relating as colleagues within academia, and the ways in which such relations intersect with particular identities (as women, as foreigners, or as junior scholars, for instance).

In finding our way through these questions, we have developed a set of values (or practices of valuing) that we try to take as inspiration for our day-to-day interactions. These values have been produced through ongoing brainstorming, writing, editing, and commenting, both in in-person meetings and asynchronously online. They are, however, not a finished project: we continue to question and develop them and to interrogate what they mean in practice. As what follows will show, in engaging in this process we take inspiration from STS's emphasis on *care* and *reflexivity*. In this context, care involves attention to 'affective state[s], ... material vital doing[s], and ... ethico-political obligation[s]' (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2011, p. 90) and reflexivity refers to turning an analytical gaze upon one's own scholarly activities (Woolgar, 1991). To us, care is a relational, affective practice that is attentive to the marginalised, unheard, or under-valued, and that seeks the

maintenance of common worlds (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2011; Tronto, 1998). In attempting to develop caring spaces, we seek to consciously engage with the affective and material conditions of our work, and to collectively improve these.

In the next section, we briefly present the values we have (at present) arrived at. Our aim has been to make explicit what we aspire to in our interactions with each other and to imagine alternative ways of living in academia. Importantly, these are *our* values, and we recognise that they may not apply to other contexts or collectives: they are not a check-list or solution. Nor do we view them as static goals to be achieved, instead understanding values and valuing as a social process that is performative, situational, and always done in practice (Heuts & Mol, 2013; Kjellberg & Mallard, 2013). In the rest of the essay we therefore critically reflect on what these values mean in practice and on the importance of framing academic citizenship as a process, rather than as something that can be readily codified and finished. Our contribution is thus not the values themselves, but the way in which they are rendered explicit and interrogated. It is this process of reflection that we hope might serve as inspiration to others. As Sümer and Eslen-Ziya (2023) write, '[t]he further marketization of the academy is neither good for gender and racial equality nor for academic freedom. It is time for a renewed reflexivity' (p. 62).

### **Identifying our values**

We have collectively developed the following values in order to make explicit how we want to relate to each other. They are just one example of such statements (see others at CLEAR, 2021; RUSTLab, 2021).

Overall, we seek to create a *caring environment* where we collectively look after each other, our research, and our colleagues, and where we can acknowledge vulnerabilities and ask for support. We both celebrate our successes and acknowledge our failures. We strive to learn from each other, soliciting advice and feedback, and recognising and apologising for harm caused through mistakes. In doing so, we want to make space for the negative feelings and difficulties that are part of academic practice.

We strive to be *collegial and non-competitive*. We seek to be interested in and to support each other's work, seeing each other as colleagues rather than competitors. We value our individual and collective well-being over publications or grants—for instance by not expecting each other to endanger mental or other forms of health in order to be 'productive.'

We acknowledge that we are embedded in a hierarchical system, and that power relations are inescapable within academia, but we *seek to be as non-*

*hierarchical as possible in our interactions*, and to collectively discuss key decisions about our activities. This means sharing and distributing tasks—for instance, rotating the organisation of meetings. Despite striving for non-hierarchical interactions, we *acknowledge our different responsibilities, experiences, and situations*. This means that we expect more of those in more senior and established roles.

We aspire to be *generous* when we give and receive feedback and in our scholarly practices. We welcome, value, and give credit to feedback and input from individuals at any stage of their academic career. We appreciate and express the positive things about each other's activities, work, and contributions, and choose to be generous in acknowledging those contributions—for instance, in authorship and acknowledgements in our writing. We *acknowledge and value care, organisational, and social forms of academic work*, especially that which takes place 'behind the scenes'—for instance, by thanking each other explicitly and by sharing in these forms of labour.

Finally, we seek to intervene in wider academic culture by *demonstrating our values* through our practices. We recognise that the system we work in involves 'racialized, gendered, care-less and classed hierarchies' (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2016, p. 12), and we try to be aware of and reflective of the problematic patriarchal and colonial structures of academia.

As noted, this remains a work in progress; the values are neither perfectly (or perhaps even well-) articulated nor realised. Discussing, challenging, and developing these values comprises an important element of our activities. In the second half of this essay, we highlight the iterative process of defining and developing our values and the practices that go along with them. If the values are designed to help nurture care within academia, what follows demonstrates the other key idea on which we draw: reflexivity.

### **Co-producing values and practices**

In defining the values described above we have been deliberately ambitious. We wish to find ways of working together that resist the tendencies described in the introduction, and we find it useful to have a set of ideas that aim towards doing academia otherwise. However, it is the *process* of making these values, the way in which we negotiate, question, and adapt them, that we see as most central to (re)imagining what academic citizenship could look like.

What we have found is that our values are 'co-produced' with, and mutually shaped by, the practices we develop to live them out (Pickersgill, 2012). In other

words, the idea(s) we have identified inspire our practices, but the practices through which we relate to each other also come to transform our values. Ultimately, the caring and reflexive academic space we strive for is more than the sum of its parts: perhaps an atmosphere, attitude, or a set of affects are better ways of describing what emerges from continuous, intentional, and mutual dialogue and reflection around shared values.

In what follows, we share some of our reflections on our values and what it means to realise them, paying particular attention to tensions that arise. These reflections have emerged from the process of developing the shared values described above, from discussions in our meetings (including those devoted to developing this essay), and from conversations we have had when we have struggled to implement or realise particular values. Importantly, we do not wish to give answers to these tensions (for instance by concretely detailing our responses to them), but rather to raise them as questions that may emerge in considering how to live well in academia. They are dynamics that speak to the tensions of academic citizenship in contemporary academia, and we raise them as input into the broader conversations represented by this special issue. We centre these questions on four foci: implementation, scale, realism, and intervention.

#### *Questions of implementation*

Caring spaces don't come about by themselves. We have found that it requires one or two individuals to take the lead in bringing people together, actively trying to create safer spaces and distributing tasks so that everybody feels a sense of responsibility and accountability. It therefore matters that some of us have permanent or longer-term (6-year) positions and a degree of agency to propose structures and activities. We have also found it important that particular people take the lead on specific issues or activities. This need for leadership has led us to reflect on the value of interacting and relating to each other in a non-hierarchical way. We have found that in certain instances, hierarchies (in the sense of differently distributed responsibilities) are helpful and perhaps even necessary. We thus experience a range of tensions around how to negotiate hierarchies. Can we, as a group that is embedded in academic structures, truly interact non-hierarchically with each other, or is the objective in this respect rather sensitivity and reflexivity in response to existing hierarchies? Who will feel able to shape or critique common projects or spaces if just a few who are responsible for their initiation and maintenance?

Caring for one another and collectively reflecting also takes time, work, and resources. We spend a lot of time coordinating, checking in with each other, and establishing the conditions and spaces for communication and joint reflection. This

kind of commitment does not work in—and perhaps is not necessary to—every group constellation. Such care is labour intensive, and often remains invisible and under-appreciated in academic reward systems. It further requires a delicate balance between caring for ourselves individually and caring for the collective. We have found that we feel individually invested in and, to certain extents, responsible for each other. While this can serve collegiality, it also blurs boundaries between our professional and private lives. By caring for each other, do we run the risk of caring too little for other aspects of our lives?

### *Questions of scale*

We also talk a lot about whether it is possible to ‘scale up’ caring spaces. Is it possible to live these values as a wider research community? Take, for example, our value of being non-competitive, which we understand as resisting the temptation to see academia as a zero-sum game. In a small group like ours, we each have our own areas of expertise, making it easier to view ourselves as not being directly in competition. For instance, those doing PhDs have different enough projects that they are unlikely to compete for the same positions at the end of their studies. In a larger community, such as a university or international research field, where there are limited jobs and multiple people with similar research profiles, is it possible to see similarity as something to value and learn from, rather than to compete with (and indeed should we even aim to do so)?

Perhaps it helps to think about this from the standpoint of collegiality rather than starting with the idea of competition. When we know a person, we assume that collegiality and care come more naturally. It is when we don’t have these relationships (in a bigger academic community or one that is ‘faceless’) that it is easier to revert to a competitive frame of mind, where everyone needs to prove themselves to everyone else. Perhaps our starting point should be that every person knows and contributes something, rather than having to prove that we know more. This also relates to our value of acknowledging and rewarding different forms of academic work. Thus, we could also understand non-competitiveness as a form of resistance to prevailing excellency discourses, in that it would involve acknowledging the value of the different kinds of contributions that are made to academia, not just those that connect to research. On the other hand, we also wonder whether a totally non-competitive environment is possible or completely desirable. How can we find a good balance between competition and collegiality?

### *Questions of realism*

Connected to questions of scale are questions relating to whether the values we strive for are realistic. Take, for instance, that we ‘value our wellbeing over

publications or grants.’ In practice, this means that we do not ask each other to work longer than we are paid to do so, or to disrupt our personal lives and responsibilities for the sake of research. Does this give us a disadvantage against individuals or groups who *do* care about publications more than their well-being? Is it realistic to live by these values and to ‘succeed’ in academia? What does wellbeing even mean—and is it the same for everybody? Perhaps for some it is about having agency over one’s work, deciding how much and at what times to work; but, maybe for others, it is also about feeling successful within the traditional academic system. This also relates to the temporalities of academic work (Felt, 2017; Müller, 2014; Ylijoki, 2016). In practicing our values, we might have short-term disadvantages (will we be less ‘productive’?) but long-term advantages (perhaps we will be more resilient?). However, if the short-term is decisive in whether we manage to stay in academia at all, does the long-term advantage become irrelevant? And, relatedly, what kind of academia do we consider worth staying in. If it is one where well-being is discounted or ignored, do we wish to participate in it?

Another question related to whether our values are realistic is of what happens when there is conflict around them. These values have been defined through collective discussion, and thus far no one has rejected them. Is this itself a kind of disciplining that excludes other kinds of academic performances, or did we just get ‘lucky’ that everyone in our group buys into the values we have defined? What would happen if someone joins our collective who does not respect or intentionally acts against these values? Would we then still be able to continue our reflection process? Relatedly, this raises questions of whether a collegial and caring environment should be one that is always pleasant, and whether we are avoiding potential disagreements for the sake of being agreeable. Would this ultimately weaken our relations and even be less caring? How can we stay critical and learn how to voice negative emotions, discuss uncomfortable aspects of our work or conflict, and still act in line with the group’s values?

### *Questions of intervention*

Despite the challenges relating to the scalability of caring spaces, one of our values is ‘to intervene in wider academic culture by demonstrating our values.’ How can we act to change wider academia whilst also navigating the existing system?

There are various concrete actions we take as we seek to visibly ‘do academia’ slightly differently: for instance, engaging with the idea of ‘citational justice’ (taking away and redistributing power by making careful choices about which literature and individuals to cite; Mott & Cockayne, 2017); making good choices when we devise research proposals (seeking funding for longer-term, full time positions whenever possible); or sharing and discussing what we experience



as caring practices beyond our group. We have taken inspiration from similar efforts, and we try to contribute to growing discussions around collective life in academia. However, one response to a widespread lack of care and justice in academia is to focus on creating safe, caring spaces that operate differently: ‘bubbles’ located within the interstices of ‘normal’ academic culture. How do these types of caring spaces relate to wider academic communities, and what responsibilities do they have to them? And what else is being done through the creation of such bubbles? One concern that we have is that creating a small, caring collective inevitably involves the exclusion of others, and perhaps facilitates ignoring worsening conditions outside the collective (Lindén & Lydahl, 2021). Might caring spaces harm those who are not within them?

## **Conclusion**

As will have become clear, interrogating the values we have identified to live well together within the academy has opened up many more questions than provided answers. However, it is this process of defining ideals, reflecting on them, and developing them further when appropriate that we regard as crucial to academic citizenship. Our values are situational, aspirational, and always in-the-making. Indeed, this essay is itself a part of this process, and has involved numerous conversations and discussions about how to describe and reflect on our values. It is thus as much a part of the practices we advocate for as it is a description of them.

In discussing our values, we hope it is clear that we are neither seeking to be prescriptive nor holding our own relations out as a model. Instead of asking and providing a final answer about what we do, this essay provides a glimpse into how we build, maintain, and reflect on how we relate to each other (one that has also been filtered through the need to care for ourselves by respecting the confidentiality of our interactions). The values we describe are not a rulebook to be followed, but rather a starting point to reflect, discuss, and make explicit how we want to relate to each other. Similarly, we are very aware of the imperfections and mistakes we make in engaging in this process. Perhaps it is only through articulating what care could and should look like that we become aware of all the ways we fail to realise it (on both individual and collective levels).

For us as a research collective, this essay is one moment in the process of imagining how we want to relate to each other within our group, and to the academy as a whole, one that we have framed as a contribution to discussions of academic citizenship. In closing, we would like to again circle around to this notion of (academic) citizenship, and to the degree to which it is sufficient as a concept for

reflecting on academic life. Citizenship as the key frame for participation in public life has been criticised as universalising, masculinising, and inherently exclusionary (Boatcă, 2016; Boatcă & Roth, 2016). In closing we therefore wonder: what other models and concepts might help us consider the nature of good academic lives?

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