

# **Precariat experiences: Narratives of casual academic staff in South African universities**

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This paper seeks to discuss precariousness in the context of academic staff. To achieve this aim, firstly, I provide a genealogical context of the emergence of casualisation of academic staff in universities. Secondly, I provide a discussion on precarity in context of academic staff. Thirdly, I make the case that using the Foucauldian view on experience can help us understand precarisation as an experience beyond the predominant political-economic approach often utilised. Fourth and lastly, I provide a conclusion.

## **The genealogy of casualization of the academic profession**

The rising casualisation of academic staff cannot be explained away from the intruding impact of neoliberalism on higher education. Courtois and O'Keefe (n.d: 39) argue that policy positions that have sought to promote the knowledge economy have led to the legitimisation of neoliberal policy being implemented in higher education and that this had resulted in universities operating like corporations.

The two main contributing factors to this has been the massification of higher education, which has precipitated the high rise in the number of students in higher education and the declining contributions of government subsidies to public higher education institutions ( Courtois & O'keefe, n.d: 43; Ivancheva, 2015: 39). The reason for this is that the neoliberal rationale postulates that governments should cut on public spending as a means of decreasing the burden on the public purse (Bond, 2003; Pennington, Mokose, Smith & Kawana, 2017). However, these cuts on subsidies have had an impact on universities with various consequences in different areas. This has led to the predominance of corporate principles such as competitiveness, performance and profitability (Courtois & O'keefe, n.d: 43).

Corporatisation has resulted in the restructuring of universities and this in turn has resulted in the rise of bureaucratisation and managerialism, the rising costs of fees, but more importantly for this paper, it has also affected the nature of academic roles. This change of academic roles has led to the increase of higher education institutions making use of cheap and flexible labour

by adopting a system of short-term research only and teaching only positions that are in line with institutional short-term productivity aims (Courtois & O'keefe, n.d: 44). The end result of this has been stronger bureaucracies that apply strict regulations and audits on academic work while academic workers have become more precarious and deprofessionalised (Ivancheva, 2015: 40).

### **Precarity in higher education**

Guy Standing (2011:10) argues that the precariat is made up of people who do not have access to seven types of work-related securities namely: (1) Labour market security, (2) Employment security, (3) Job security, (4) Work security, (5) Skill reproduction security, (6) Income security and (7) Representation security. This shows us that this is a group of workers that does not enjoy the securities and protections of the ordinary worker often protected by legislation for the purpose of development and social reproduction. Standing (2011:16) refers to this group of workers as "living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle". One can say that the lives of these people are often defined by a sense of anxiety, uncertainty and an inability to adequately plan their future because they are never sure of their circumstances.

Unfortunately, the exact extent of the problem in the context of South Africa has not been established, and this is evident in the lack of available literature (at least to the author's knowledge) on the problem in South African universities. However, this should not give an impression that this is an issue not worth serious scholarly consideration. The effects of precarious employment on the lives of working people and their job conditions in other sectors outside of universities have been widely studied in the past decades and it is important that same be done with regards to universities as social institutions. One can argue that casualization has universities has turned into institutions that reproduce social inequalities, strict control of populations and promote instability of families in some instances.

This has taken place in the following ways. Firstly, because casualized academic workers do not qualify for workplace benefits such as study benefits they often find difficulty with studying further to increase their chances of permanent employment. This gives the ones from privileged families the opportunity to study further, while the rest remain behind with low wages. This is one in which inequalities are reproduced. Secondly, in other cases, those who receive fixed

teaching contracts also encounter problems in that they are often swamped with a lot of work to the extent that they cannot prioritize research in their own time. This minimises their chances of visibility in a sector defined by a culture of publish or perish and this often results in them losing their jobs. Thirdly, casualization also disturbs the positive development of familial and social ties. Sometimes the unavailability of jobs forces people to move and stay in different countries for a few months or years depending on their contracts. This often destabilises family and reduces the extent to which one can maintain social and professional networks that may be beneficial in terms of career upward mobility. Fourthly, due to reduction of labour costs casualized staff often finds themselves being paid low wages to the extent of having to more than one job and even sleeping in their cars as a result of not affording housing costs. In some instances, some have even had to resort sex during the night to supplement their low incomes. Fifthly, casualization has enabled quite an efficient system of managing casualized workers to ensure they work in line with the short-term benefits of the institutions. This in turn has had negative consequences such as people losing their jobs for standing up for themselves against departmental bullies and even losing their jobs if they do not receive positive assessments during student performance assessments of casualized staff (Courtois & O'keefe, n.d.; Ivancheva, 2015; Neff, 2017).

### **The case of Foucault's understanding of experience and precariousness of academic staff**

For Foucault experience should be understood as the result of interplay between "games of truth, forms of power and the regulation of selves". Foucault (1997:297) argues that games of truth are a "set of rules by which truth is produced". This means that for Foucault truth is not about absoluteness or relativity, but truth is a result of certain practices and power relations that form a consensus around an idea or set of ideas. When the respondents were asked how their experiences were made sense of by society, they pointed at different influences that shaped how they precarity was viewed by others. They pointed to the (1) national discourse on jobs, (2) their university and (3) their families. With regards to the national discourse they felt that their plight was not given adequate attention and that most focus was on outsourced workers. Their situation was a sort of misrecognition because they felt that it would be an embarrassment for the government and universities if the broader society knew that educated people earned very little money. With regards to their university, they felt that universities were taking advantage of the fact that large graduates were not being absorbed by the labour market, so they knew that people would stay in those jobs because they had nowhere else to go.

They pointed that their jobs were portrayed as a form of job experience gaining opportunity that would benefit them and felt dispensable because they know it would be very easy to find a replacement for them. With regards to their families, they felt their families had little understanding of their circumstances, the impression of their families was often that since they worked in a university and were educated they had to have a lot of money and that this made it to embarrassed about their jobs especially when they had to ask for financial assistance from their parents when they run out of transport money or food in the middle of the month. The responses were as follows:

There is a lot of silence about situation in the national discourse, fees must fall managed to shed light on the plight of outsourced workers, but the labour regimes of the universities were never investigated. Maybe, this is because it would be embarrassing for government and our institutions to admit that they oversee such exploitation of educated people and also this need for jobs in South Africa forces to be appreciate of the little jobs we work although we are not happy about them and government wants to give the impression that the country is not moving slowly in the direction of insecure forms of employment (Respondent 1).

Our universities gives the impression that what we have are not real jobs, that they are giving us an opportunity to earn something while we wait for real jobs or that it is opportunity to gain experience. You won't see in official documents, but you know things are kept going by those things that are not spoken of. These are things that often said in passing to us, but what can we do? There are no jobs out there and if I talk too much I won't receive a contract the following year and they can just replace with someone just graduating who is excited about earning an income (Respondent 2).

You now our families don't understand our situation. For them because we are educated and working for a university we must be swimming in big money. However, that is not how things are, sometimes I often find myself having to ask for money for food or transport from parents in the middle of the month and its embarrassing (Respondent 3).

This shows that conceptions of truth with regards to circumstances are shaped by multiple factors. The respondents understand that the structural level, their problem emanated from the

economy which was not labour absorbing and moving towards insecure forms of employment. But they also showed how at the meso-level and interpersonal level, their universities and families viewed responded and viewed their precarity.

Foucault's view of power is multidimensional and consists of four aspects. "*Firstly*, he sees powers as a set of force relations, *secondly* as processes through which relations are transformed, *thirdly*, systems that are constituted by the interplay between force relations, and *fourthly* larger strategies with general and institutional characteristics that emerge from these relations, processes and systems." (Lynch, 2014: 19; emphasis added). What can be seen is that Foucault's analysis of power starts from the micro-level and builds up to the macro-level. He does not define power in the instrumental sense, but refers to it in the relational sense by considering how practices and processes can make up systems and how at the macro-level these relations, processes and systems can influence the make-up of institutions.

The respondents were asked if they could identify any power mechanisms that they could identify which contributed to their circumstances. The different answers pointed to four factors, (1) government, (2) short-term contracts and (3) knowledge on how to organise labour for efficiency and (4) Models of external universities in Europe and America. The responses were as follows:

I can identify the government. Reason for saying is that it is government that sets parameters in which the economy is going to function. Now what we have in our case in South Africa is neo-liberal policies, these policies encourage that government cut on social spending and promote liberalisation of the economy. Liberalisation of the economy means reducing government intervention in the economy and promoting the idea that the market laws of supply and demand to precedence on how the economy functions. This is the reason wages are low, because there is a high supply of unemployed labour and there is a little demand for labour. This is the keep wages low. But we are not the exception; this is happening in countries in America and Europe and its way worse there. What I failed to understand is why we are importing models that are already in crisis in their places of origin. I also saw that these types of workers are unionising in those nations. We don't know what will happen. So I can say the power mechanisms I can mention government policy and our universities copying outside with

giving attention to the consequences of those models in their places of origins and how they would play out in South Africa's situation (Respondent 1).

The contract is definitely a way of control. You know if you will rebel against their nonsense around September, then it's over for you. You won't be given a renewal contract for the following year. They have different hour regimes, for example below 10 hours, below 30 and 40 hours. Funny enough, you will never know how to get to the higher hours. We don't have offices, so we cannot consult with students when they don't understand. This also diminishes our authority in front of the students. We don't get paid for marking and preparation at home. It's bad, but what can we say (Respondent 3).

I think knowledge plays a very huge in how the management justifies to itself how it structures labour contracts and so forth. I remember attending a workshop when I was a student and the facilitator there was telling us that we should use interns as way of decreasing costs in our business and when I got into this situation. I realised that was exactly what was being done to me. I don't have benefits such study ones or medical aid even pension. So a lot of money is being saved...we live by faith my brother even if get sick you just pray it is not bad because you can't afford a full medical check-up. It's either food or medicine (Respondent 2).

This actually shows how power relations permeate the respondents' circumstances. It seems that they do not perceive their circumstances as a result of their own failures, but relate it to the broader forces at play in society. Respondent has even managed to show us how power relations are accompanied by types of reasoning about phenomena.

Relations of the self refer to what he called the technologies of the self. Technologies of the self in simple terms refer to modes of self (O'Leary, 2008, 17). In detail, generally one can relate this to Foucault's view on subjectivity. Foucault understood subjectivity as a form of performance, an activity that takes place within a context of limitations (Taylor, 2014: 173 - 174). This means that it was certain practices that constituted subjectivity, meaning that we make ourselves through different practices and he argued that these practices were shaped by institutional constraints. To express this one can say that we make ourselves but the practices that we use to make ourselves are limited by institutional constraints. The respondents were

asked how they made sense of precarity personally and it affected their self-image. The impression that could be gathered was that the respondents felt that they were denied a sense of security that they felt they had earned. They felt that they were objectified and were only useful to the extent that they served the universities short-term objectives. The responses are as follows:

Precarity is not knowing where you will in your life in the following year, that inability to plan because your income is not secure. You can't get a loan from a bank, which means I am still going to rent for some time to come. I think it influences my life in the sense that in as much as I have appreciated the knowledge I have gained through education. I think universities do not attribute the same value to the education they give us when one considers the salaries we get. This is a contradiction when one considers how expensive education is. To some level, I have started to lose respect for the higher education sector and for myself in the process because I often find myself feeling sorry for students who do not know what lies ahead for them. This is a crisis in the making. I also find myself angry most of the time. Sometimes people will tell you that academia is not for people who want money, it's a calling and not a profession. Mind you, the people who tell us these things are living better lives than us (Respondent 1).

I feel like precarity in my case is a form of super-exploitation. I used to be happy when I first got my job, I saw myself as a freelancer, but little did I know that things are not that nice. You are given the impression that you are serving a greater mission, but that is a lie. Precarity is the inability to assist your family back at home after they spent their money on you sending to university. I know a lot of people won't say it, but we still get assistance from home to live and if you don't have family that can assist, you get a partner that works whom you can share living costs with. The days of men who provide are over; we can't afford to pay for that role anymore (Respondent 2).

I feel like a machine that is expected to produce what is wanted. The yearly contracts are like when you fix something. Everything has its sell-by date. I don't know when mine will come. Precarity for me feels like being denied a future I worked hard for through getting education and I am not that optimistic about the future (Respondent 3).

The interplay of different facets of the theory constitutes what Foucault refers to as experience. Generally, this interplay is often referred to as the combination of "knowledge/power-relation of self" (O'Leary, 2008, 21).

In addition to the case above, applying this model to the plight of casualized academic staff, scholars can explore how their precarity is often communicated in official discourse. The games of truth show that truth or legitimate knowledge is often built on the exclusion of other types of knowledge and uses that exclusion to the function of that which is included. This can lead us in the direction of seeing alternative modes of employment that universities can use or have not explored and try to understand their justifications for taking alternative positions. With regards to the power/knowledge, it can be explored how universities' governing of labour relates to a particular political reasoning. In order for an institution to govern, the practices it employs need to be accompanied by certain rationale; this may show us the contestations of relations of powers in institutions and how authority is organised, packaged, enacted and justified in different institutions. Lastly, by considering the relation of all these forces, scholars can explore and provide a genealogy of precarity as a state of being and also how it operates a sort of organising or regulating mechanism that influences how individuals make sense of themselves in relation to the operations of society.

## **Conclusion**

This essay sought to put across the idea that precarity of academic staff should be given attention in scholarly circles. More than anything, the value of the Foucauldian approach is that it problematises relations from the micro-level. The fact that most approaches are macro based makes us take micro relations for granted. One's impression is that this stems from the tendency of often viewing the university as a microcosm of society; such an approach blinds us from seeing how universities may be spaces consciously implicated in the reproduction of the status quo and injustices. It is important that all spaces be viewed are nodes of entanglements of power relations, although the spaces may not carry equal weight in terms of influencing the final make-up of the society. This is because power relations do not play themselves out in all places in the same way. Scholars therefore have to be sensitive to the "micro-physics" of power at our own institutional level.

It is only through doing this that institutions of higher learning can be re-politicized and issues be given the necessary attention before crisis erupts. The Foucauldian view can show us that precarization can also be seen as a sort of means of conduct that can be imposed on a person's life. The contract, student evaluations, and faculty members all serve as devices that regulate the temporary academic staff's life. They seek to fashion a particular self out of the temporary staff according to certain standards. It seems that methods being employed by universities are similar to those of the production line with efficient mechanisms in place to make a particular standard of products and if the product does not meet the standards, it is put aside. This is the political-economic logic that informs the conduct of temporary staff.

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