Disrupting Academia's Care-Free Narrative: Is the narrative CV just another agent of obfuscation?

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Abstract

With its emphasis on countable outcomes and rewards, the conventional academic CV struggles to capture the essential but unquantifiable influences in the knowledge construction process. Mirroring the masculine rationalities on which academic traditions are built, the academic CV is particularly hostile to the disclosure of care-giving experiences, even though care plays an undeniable and integral role in academic work. A development of the academic CV, the narrative CV, is fast becoming a standard requirement in funding applications across Europe and beyond. In principle, the narrative CV encourages recognition of a range of contributions and skillsets beyond bibliometric indicators and funding awards. However, and with specific reference to UK Research and Innovation's Résumé for Research and Innovation, we examine the types of 'care obfuscations' and confessions supported by the CV in both its traditional and narrative form. While the narrative CV appears to offer an experimental space for pushing against the care-less presentation of academic work, funders still need to explicitly consider the influence of care and care inequalities in the academic system. Without demonstrating that they have done so, and without sufficient evaluation systems in place, applicants will continue to rely on quantifiable accomplishments, reinforcing the same culture which initially inspired funders' concern for gaining a 'holistic' overview on individual applicants.

Keywords: universities; research; caregiving; CV; funding

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Introduction

Upon gaining traction among research funders and organizations on an international scale, including the Dutch Research Council (**NWO, 2022**), Luxembourg National Research Fund (**2022**), Swiss National Science Foundation (**SNSF, 2022**) and UK Research and Innovation (**UKRI, 2021**), the narrative CV (NCV), and variations thereof, is fast becoming a staple requirement in funding applications. While there is no universal agreement on the structure of a NCV, formats generally depart from the traditional CV's narrow focus on an applicant's education, publication, and funding history. For example, UKRI's Résumé for Research and Innovation (R4RI) asks candidates to outline their contributions to 'the development of others' and towards 'wider societal benefit.' By allowing applicants to discuss a wider range of contributions and skillsets, NCV formats aim to address concerns, (often diversity-related,) surrounding an overemphasis on publication numbers, journal-based indicators, and adherence to traditional or linear research career paths (**Fritch et al., 2021**). In theory, the expansion of the content that candidates can include on their CVs facilitates a similar expansion of evaluation criteria. While this impact is not often described explicitly, it can be inferred that legitimizing a broader range of experiences also broadens the pool of credible candidates (**Bordignon et al., 2023b**).

In this critical reflection, we leverage our expertise on the experience of academic caregivers in the UK to explore the NCV's potential to better serve this group in funding applications. Academics who have caring responsibilities, as well as those who engage in care-related activities like pastoral and diversity work, can experience marginalization in the workplace. In a professional setting that values strategy, rigor, and competition, the unpredictable and emotional nature of care can be perceived as disruptive or as a sign that an academic is not fully committed to their role or research. This can result in a phenomenon known as 'care obfuscation', coined by Etheridge (**2023**), which refers to actions taken to deny, conceal, or downplay the impact of care responsibilities on a person's ability to meet the expectations of academic work. While it is generally advised that a successful strategy is to under-promise and over-deliver (**Bradt, 2017**), the prevalent 'masculinity contest culture' (**Berdahl et al., 2018**) within academic environments can push care-giving academics to accept unrealistic expectations and/or refuse support. Consequently, care-givers may struggle to fulfil their responsibilities and may grapple with workloads that are unsustainable and detrimental to their well-being.

While the arrival of the NCV appears to mark a change in the contributions valued in funding bids, the notion of 'obfuscation' allows us to reflect on the extent to which this shift includes experiences of caregiving. By examining the ways in which obfuscations and confessions may occur in narrative vs traditional formats, we advocate for the further development of approaches to funding applications and evaluations that explicitly address the exclusions of care within academic work and culture. It is not our intention to imply that the CV is or should always be considered an appropriate place to discuss care-giving influences. However, we approach this topic from the perspective that care is a disruptive, productive, and inevitable force in knowledge production. A failure to accommodate this force can amount to a lack of awareness regarding: the challenges faced by caregivers; the support needs of this group; and the valuable ideas and skillsets that care-giving experiences and qualities offer researchers and the research environment.

Although our analysis draws predominantly from the R4RI, it is not our intention to provide a value judgement on either this format or NCVs more broadly. Following Bordignon, Chaignon and Egret (**2023a&b**), we utilize the NCV as a starting point for contemplating the wider research context:

> *The implementation of this new type of CV undeniably has the advantage of opening up the debate, raising awareness and calling assessors (and the candidates themselves, potential future assessors) to question the bad practices and biases that exist in the researchers' assessment processes.* (**Bordignon et al., 2023a: 319**),

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we argue that the politics of care informing research environments within universities in the UK excludes those who give care both outside and within these institutions. Second, we examine how this politics inspires care obfuscations, and how these practices translate on the traditionally academic CV. Reflecting on what a narrative turn might mean for the way care is presented and absented on funding documents, we argue that the continued development of NCV format should be done with intentional consideration for care-giving activities and experiences.

Care and Universities

What does it mean to care? The word 'care' can have enveloping and dismissive implications. The things and people that we care about and for (or not) can form the foundations upon which our lives and priorities are structured. A feminist ethic of care acknowledges interdependency as a social condition (**Tronto, 2015; Care Collective, 2020**), meaning the sustainability of our social and economic structures depends on caring responsibilities and our willingness to meet each other's needs. Although

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it might be assumed that giving care is an inherently positive thing, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (**2017**) associates care with responsiveness, defining it as: 'everything that is done to maintain, continue, and repair the world'. As our collective 'responses' to the world are shaped by cultural and political factors, Puig de la Bellacasa argues care is a non-innocent practice: one can care in ways that cause harm.

What do Universities Care About?

In this critical reflection we discuss the experiences of care-giving academics. While the perspective of care outlined above challenges the idea that it is possible to be 'care-free' or 'care-less' – the condition of co-dependency is not one we can opt out of (**Butler, 2021**) – here we direct our attention to the experiences and marginalisation of academics with care-giving responsibilities and relationships, such as those towards children, kin, students and friends.

It may be easy to think of universities as inherently caring spaces, and that academic teaching and research can facilitate care by investigating societal issues like inequality, health crises, climate change, and political conflict. Care can also be found in the inter-relationships between the people who work in the academic space, both formally and informally. Indeed, academia has a more codified 'mentor/mentee' structure than many other sectors or environments. Still, the processes of knowledge production and dissemination have the potential for apathy and callousness. The division between the work that is and is not done, the ideas that are and are not taught or funded, (or deemed fundable), and the academics who are and are not considered 'excellent' can perpetuate knowledge systems that neglect, condemn, and marginalize certain groups and experiences (**Gopal, 2021; Arday, 2022; Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2022**).

Universities are strongly influenced by political and economic contexts, including the political philosophy of the state, whether the state is liberal democratic or authoritarian. According to **Dillabough (2022)**, after World War II, European higher education was viewed as separate from government control and provided a platform for democratic discussion. Nevertheless, these 'deliberative spaces' have since been co-opted to support neoliberal agendas, impacting the care hierarchies perpetuated by and through universities, as well as the care priorities of those working within them.

Government influence on higher education is exerted through market demands, competition, and 'new managerial' orientations, (**Al Mahameed et al., 2024**). Following the expansion of the sector throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the transfer of tuition costs from the state to students has implicitly and explicitly encouraged students to attend

institutions that provide value for money. This value is determined by factors such as age, word of mouth, social connections (**Williams & Filippakou, 2010**), rankings, as well as 'excellence' frameworks that use quantitative metrics including student satisfaction scores, graduate outcomes, teacher-student ratios, and publications to evaluate institutional performance (**UKRI; Corner, 2023; Office for Students, 2023**). In view of this competitive landscape, UK universities prioritise measurable criteria, and ask that academics demonstrate a willingness to preserve the reputational and financial longevity of the institutions they work for or aspire to work for – that is, academics are motivated to care about, and according to, the values that make up university rankings.

Who do Universities Care About?

Despite a sector-wide focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), neoliberal ideology and policy drive in the opposite direction, leading to the exclusion of academic staff with care-giving responsibilities. Within the competitive environment described, organizations rely on audits and metrics for assessment. The successful academic is therefore seen as someone who contributes positively to such assessment by fully devoting their time, attention, and financial stability to achieving excellence (**Rosewell, 2022**). Under these conditions, it is only logical that the temporal and logistical constraints that come with care-giving obligations result in productivity and performance gaps. While the care-giving responsibilities of these individuals involve socially essential but unquantifiable work, academic care-givers may come to be perceived by others, (as well as themselves,) as having less competitive value or potential (**Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018; van Engen et al., 2019**).

These competitive attitudes can have significant influence on the level of gender equality within academic work. In UK society, women bear most care responsibilities (**Hochlaf et al., 2022**). This trend persists within academia, where female faculty members are more likely to have partners who work full-time, while male faculty members are more likely to have partners who work part-time or take on household and care-giving responsibilities full-time (**Schiebinger et al., 2008; Bascom-Slack, 2011; Lantsoght et al., 2021**). Even in households where both partners have careers, women still shoulder a greater share of household duties (**Stadnyk & Black, 2020**). Academic women who are in relationships with academic men may experience slightly more equal sharing of household responsibilities compared to academic women in other types of relationships (**King & Frederickson, 2021**); however, a recent survey conducted by **Derrick et al.,** (**2022**), which involved over 10,000 respondents, found that academic mothers are more likely to be the primary caregivers.

It is only logical that these differences amount to gender disparities in the workplace. In various academic fields, men tend to hold a larger share of senior positions and attain higher academic status (**Harris & Maté-Sánchez-Val, 2022; Woodhams et al., 2022**). Still, competitive ideologies make it difficult to evidence any systemic exclusion. In a landscape where success and the potential for 'excellence' are measured by tangible outcomes, success is rendered synonymous with deserving.

Masculine Rationalities and Care Exclusions

Attempts to understand care barriers can reinforce, rather than disrupt, academia's performative preferences. Some researchers who have studied the impact of parenthood on academic careers have previously relied on publication records as a means of assessing productivity levels (**Lutter & Schröder, 2019; Morgan et al., 2021; Cairo et al., 2023**). This approach inherently reduces publication to a 'yes' or 'no' binary, and so overlooks the challenges faced in the publication process as well as any sacrifices made to complete publications, (such as spending less time with children or partner or neglecting other work commitments). This approach also fails to account for non-quantifiable but ultimately productive activities like teaching, mentoring, and promoting EDI equity and diversity. Given that women, (particularly women of colour,) often undertake or find themselves assigned such responsibilities (**Ashencaen Crabtree & Shiel, 2019**), equating productivity with publications, (and, following that, publications with equal participation,) ignores the gendered disparities in terms of the care-giving that occurs within institutions.

Examining the impact of care on academic careers requires a holistic approach that recognizes the multidimensional, political, and ethical nature of care in academia. It also requires a recognition of the fact that current practices were not developed with care responsibilities in mind. Davies et al. (**2022**) argue that academia is a system that has been created by privileged individuals, specifically white, middle-class men who had their care responsibilities taken care of by somebody else. Those who now look to enter the academic system are required to conform to the rules imposed by this structure and tradition. It is not the case that all men, or those in power, are necessarily actively enforcing these rules to oppress women; a system that has been established by and for men achieves this by default, hindering the advancement of individuals who do not identify as male.

The dominance of masculine rationality within academia and beyond contributes to prevailing assumptions: 1) that care is a feminine characteristic, and 2) that the feminine is weaker than the masculine. This perception often stigmatizes academic women who are caregivers, creating a sense of inadequacy even for those who appear, or who are,

successful (**Acker & Feuerverger, 1996**). Although we do not mean to assume that all male care-giving academics feel confident in their abilities, the association of care with the feminine lends to the assumption that women have a natural inclination for caregiving. That is, while women's care responsibilities may be seen to be inevitable, men's care activities are regarded as the result of a care shortfall. This perception leads to gender-based inequalities in the way care-giving academics navigate the workplace. Women, for example, may experience continuous discrimination or anticipated discrimination based on their perceived capacity to give care, (whether to young children or elders). As care is something men are thought to do sporadically, men are more capable of appearing 'care-free', even if they aren't. To put it another way, men are more likely to appear in line with idealised and ideological image of the excellent academic who is solely dedicated and focused on their work (**Hughes, 2021; Davies et al., 2022**).

Care Obfuscations

The care exclusions within academic work give rise to a campaign of behaviours called 'care obfuscations' (**Etheridge, 2023**), a term used to describe the tendency to deny, hide or underestimate the impact care responsibilities have on one's ability to meet the norms of academic labour. In Etheridge's doctoral thesis on 41 UK-based academics' experience of the transition to (desired) parenthood, she argues that academic mothers, precluded from normative academic success standards, employ 'care obfuscation' as a strategy for appearing in alignment with these standards. This involves obscuring care-oriented ties from view of (potential) colleagues, managers, readers and students. Through (knowingly and unknowingly) overcommitting, non-disclosing or refusing help, obfuscators may become isolated, they may fail to deliver and/or undertake unsustainable workloads that are ultimately detrimental to their well-being (**Tomkins & Eatough, 2014; Allard & Whitfield, 2022**).

Even though obfuscation is an activity undertaken by the individual, Etheridge considers obfuscation to be symptomatic of a hierarchical politics of care in which caring about others – and being seen to care about others – is valued over the provision of direct care (**Tronto, 2013**). In the context of academic work, these hierarchies and subsequent care exclusions are forged through academia's culture of toxic competition. In this culture, obfuscation may be deemed a bid for professional survival, a means for avoiding marginalization, or as an 'enterprising' activity (e.g., **Moisander, Groß & Eräranta, 2018**) – that is, the means through which one 'activates the desired self' (**Mughal et al., 2023**), here understood to be the seemingly care-free academic male.

Obfuscations in the Academic CV

In the remaining sections of this reflection, we use care obfuscation as a means for exploring the politics of care that are proliferated by and embedded within academic CV conventions. Traditionally, academic CVs emphasize achievements by listing measurable contributions and experiences, including publications and awards. While including details about periods of formal care leave may be a common practice, for example (e.g., 'I took a period of maternity leave'), doing so carries the risk of discrimination or the anticipation of discrimination. Indeed, care-giving academics have sought to avoid disclosing periods of leave by engaging in pre-emptive strategies, such as presenting or submitting papers while on leave (**Miller & Riley, 2022; Rosewell, 2022; Hillier, 2023**).
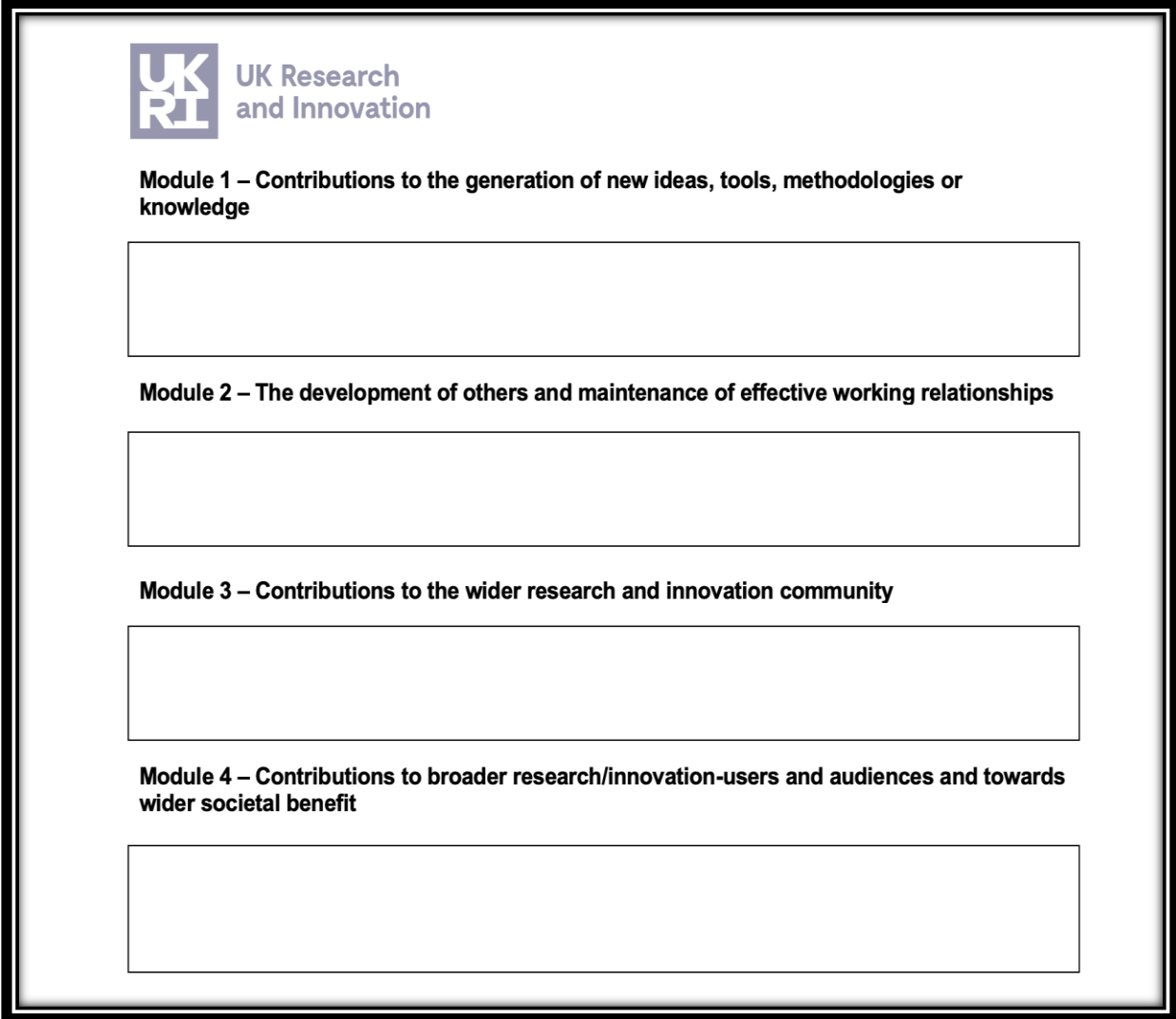
Obfuscations occur in the unspoken aspects of the caregiver's CV. As care experiences are unique, the typically brief disclose of care leave reduces this complex experience to a simple sentence, providing insufficient insight on any challenges faced or personal and professional transformations that occurred around this time. CV obfuscations therefore hide from view the influence care-giving experiences have on research interests and skills; career decisions, such as whether one stays on an academic track; one's national or (inter)national mobility; and the character of one's contract, (whether it is's full time or part time). At the same time, not all care experiences amount to a formal period of leave, and it can be difficult for applicants to know at what point such experiences can be included, if at all. Still, the inclusion of only formally agreed absences obscures the everyday nature of caregiving. This is problematic because caregivers are highly skilled, and it is not only their obligations that are concealed in CV obfuscations, but the extent of their capabilities and the place from where they developed. This includes their time management skills, ability to multitask, aptitude for empathy, and capacity to respond effectively to crisis situations.

NVCs

Compared to the traditional CV, narrative formats typically allow space for the discussion of broader, non-quantifiable forms of academic contribution. The four modules of UKRI's R4RI intend to provide opportunities for academics applying for funding to recognise the wide range of influence that make up academic life. In a Joint Statement on the NCV, UKRI (**2021**) describe wanting to '[enable] the diverse R&D workforce to demonstrate who they are as individuals. Guidance for NCV writers, developed by the University of Glasgow (**Adams, 2021**) and the University of Oxford (**University of Oxford, 2023**), as well as funders such as Alzheimer's Research UK (ARUK) give advice on choosing activities for each

module, and how to structure paragraphs to best show impact and reflection. ARUK, for instance, indicates this 'allows these achievements to be put in the broader context of the researcher's activities.' Their guidance mentions that 'some of the CV sections may be lighter in content than others or some may be left empty' (ARUK).

Figure 1: UKRI's Résumé for Research and Innovation template

UKRI's Résumé for Research and Innovation template

In focusing on the individual, NCVs seemingly give academics space to discuss the impact of non-research related experiences on their career, including – it may be surmised – caregiving, periods of care leave and care-related contributions within the university space (which are often unrecognised). Still, there are tensions between this principled interest in the individual and the individualistic character of academic work under neoliberalism. Although NCVs can provide 'a much richer, more nuanced picture of an individual scholar's contribution' (**Gadd, 2022**), the word 'contribution' sustains an emphasis on what one has done, and not on what one could do, the latter being the apparent focus of funding

applications. Given the lack of empirical evidence on what applicants write in the different modules, it is difficult to say how applicants interpret the prompts. For instance, on paper, the phrasing of module 2, 'the development of others and maintenance of effective working relationships', acknowledges the implication of others in one's career. Contrary to the collaborative, team-based nature of much research work, the wording of module appears to emphasise what one has done for other people as opposed to with them.

NCV formats typically allow for a 'Personal Details' or 'Additional Information' section that caregivers could use to disclose their responsibilities. Due to its inclusion in funding applications, the NCV is a high stakes document, however. While funding rounds are inherently competitive, this competition hinders the NCV's objective of expanding the discussion of experiences beyond the usual realm of an academic CV. This is the result of a lack of clarity regarding which experiences are pertinent and how they will be assessed by reviewers. Cancer Research UK suggest that assessors 'consider the [narrative] CV sections holistically, and not in isolation, when making assessments on the skills and expertise of the candidate'. Yet funders are reluctant to provide examples of 'good' NCVs. Although this is likely an intentional effort to foster innovation in approaches to grant and job applications, the extent to which this approach will be successful is uncertain given that applicants have little indication – or reassurance - as to how care-giving experiences would be assessed should they disclose them. There is also little assurance that evaluators have been sufficiently trained to recognise, and then mitigate, the effect of their biases on the evaluation process - biases which may be particularly influential in a format that aims to invite a broader set of experiences.

Obfuscation by Design?

Without, then, adequate examples of different possibilities, academics may continue to draw from the neoliberal 'common sense' (**Torres, 2011**) of the cut-throat, metrics-based evaluation system that cast care-confessions and experiences as distractions from the performative point. This discussion asks whether the R4RI truly encourage a broader range of experiences or if this format succeeds only in capturing the same experiences as the traditional CV, albeit packaged in a slightly different way. From this perspective, the implementation of NCVs in funding settings marks a continued move towards obfuscation. Funders' supposed concern for the 'individual' displaces responsibility for disclosure on the applicant, allowing funders to get away with not engaging with the care hierarchies and exclusions that affect the way funding applications are assessed. This perspective extends Etheridge's concept of obfuscations,

moving from a focus on the obfuscations of individuals towards a recognition of the ones committed by organisations, institutions and funding bodies, who, in rationalising knowledge production according to the masculine rationalities outlined in the first half of this paper, dismiss, deny and underestimate the impact of caregiving on academic work.

Crucially, we are not writing for the abandonment of the R4RI, and we want to avoid a reversal of this narrative turn, which has occurred following the initial implementation of a NCV requirement in funding applications to the Dutch funder, NWO. Despite being one of the pioneers of narrative formats, NWO have recently indicated a lack of trust in the narrative disclosures of applicants. In establishing the 'evidence-based CV', they have now returned to an emphasis on that which can be considered, 'objectifiable':

> *For a while, we [NWO] asked researchers to send in a 'NCV', in which you don't use lists and figures, and not all of us were happy with that. We got criticism from our own selection committees: a CV like that is hard to verify, they can say whatever they fancy. So we're moving over to an evidence-based CV.* (**Levi, 2022**)

The continued development of the NCV in a UK context requires empirical investigation on the effectiveness of various narrative formats. Some efforts are being made in this regard, including by the Action Research on Research Culture (**ARRC, 2023**) project at the University of Cambridge (note: the authors of this paper are affiliated with this project). At the time of writing, however, we do not know of any research addressing the more subtle implications of CV format, such as those covered in this paper. More directed efforts should be made to ascertain the explicit and implicit negotiations around care that occur in the writing and evaluation of academic CVs. In this regard, inspiration may be sought from the SNSF (**2022**) CV format. The SNSF includes a section on 'net academic age', which is 'the reference value for evaluators to assess the achievements in relation to the time actively spent on research'. Applicants calculate their net academic age by deducting the relevant duration of career breaks, including parental leave, care duties more broadly and part-time work. Importantly, reviewers cannot see the reasons behind the deductions, which may go some way to addressing the role of care biases in assessment. Even so, this approach continues in the way of care obfuscation, with terminology such as 'interruption' echoing the masculine rationalities that liken care - the thing that drives the continuation of the world in which our research is conducted – to a moral and epistemological weakness.

Concluding Thoughts

Whether or not the CV is the appropriate place to discuss care experiences is a contentious point, including among the authors of this paper. Although we maintain that current CV formats flatten care-giving experiences and is biased towards the (implausible) construct of the seemingly 'care-free' academic, we are not necessarily writing as advocates for complete care transparency in the CV. Indeed, we find ourselves caught between wanting to see caregiving and care acknowledged more explicitly in funding rounds and CV formats, and feeling mistrustful of the neoliberal logic that underpins UK society and academic which, in telling us to convert absolutely all of ourselves into engines of productivity, may burden caregivers with the task of manipulating and weaving their experiences into tales of deservedness.

Instead, we advocate for 'care safety' in the application process. Applicants should have the ability to disclose and discuss their care-giving experiences, should they choose, and to do so without fear of being penalised. This shift to care safety begins not with encouraging applicants to disclose but with changing the frameworks used to evaluate their applications. How, we argue, can writing about care responsibilities be normalised unless there are wider incentives to normalise the visibility and contribution of care responsibilities?

The absence of care considerations within the UKRI NCV format overlooks not only the impact of care-giving experiences on knowledge generation but the influence of care in a broader sense, understood by Puig de la Bellacasa (**2017**) as a form of responsiveness. Indeed, beyond the individuals we care for directly, our inclinations towards objects, ideas, topics, individuals, and processes significantly shape our academic engagement, influencing ideas we pursue, our motivational levels, and ultimately the outcomes we can achieve. The fact of the matter is that care influences how we feel about others, ourselves, our employers, the sector, funders and society more broadly. Care affects how we regard our accomplishments, and how we communicate about them. Crucially, our care-giving experiences (or lack thereof) also influence how we receive the care-giving experiences of others.

If, as ideas around unconscious bias conversations have suggested, the way we think about and respond to others is politically and culturally informed, it stands to reason that the assessment of funding bids is also politically and culturally informed. This means the ideas, sentiments, and things that evaluators care about can impact the success of funding applications. As such, care oversights in the development of NCV formats risk supporting care obfuscatory practices and so weakening the diversifying effects of these innovations. As we have sought to

demonstrate in this critical reflection, the failure to explicitly consider the presence of care, and the manner in which care should be described and acknowledged in professional contexts, may keep applicants' reliant on the 'common sense' of academia's 'masculinity contest culture' (**Berdahl et al., 2018**), the same culture which initially inspired funders' concern for gaining a 'holistic' overview on individual applicants. To put it another way, without care-full considerations, the current narrative turn shows, despite all good intentions, a lack of care for care.

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