A Badiouian enquiry into hope labour: Affective and temporal disorientation in contingent academic careers during the Covid-19 event.

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Abstract

Hope labour, defined as work undertaken in anticipation of realising an idealised academic career, functions as a core strategy for contingent academics, sustained by an affective attachment to a utopian future. Mobilising Badiou's theoretical ideas of the event, in this paper, we draw on forty in-depth interviews to explore contingent academics' experiences of hope labour during the disruption and prolonged uncertainty brought about by the Covid-19 event. We unravel the process of enquiry in which our participants engage and identify the subjective responses of contingent academics – disaffection and temporal disorientation of hope – that challenge the future-oriented logic of hope labour. We contribute to existing research in organisation studies that examines the commitment and attachment of the subject to the normative, neoliberal belief in hope labour, by explaining the commitment of the subject to change when the ordinary is disrupted. We conclude by discussing the potential of our conceptualisation for hope labour and its implications for contingent academic careers.

Introduction

Ever worsening conditions in higher education in many parts of the world brought about by the promotion of neoliberal values, have profoundly reshaped academic working lives (Fleming, 2021; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), turning academic careers into a continuous performance-driven quest (Bristow, Robinson & Ratle, 2017) accompanied by increased levels of stress, anxiety and insecurity (Clarke & Knights, 2015; Collinson, 2003). These pressures are felt even more by contingent academics working at the periphery of the neoliberal university. The proliferation of fixed-term, part-time or zero-hour contracts has trapped many academics in 'a hamster wheel of precarity' (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015, p.466), often for prolonged periods or perhaps indefinitely (Ivancheva, Lynch & Keating, 2019). In the neoliberal university, contingent academics are perceived as 'non-citizens', a position evident in formal recognition, such as in the lack of entitlements and adequate pay, as well as in informal dimensions, including social and decision-making power (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). Yet, in the pursuit of securing a permanent, ongoing contract, contingent academics engage ceaselessly in 'hope labour' (Alacovska, 2019).

Hope labour or work undertaken in anticipation of realising the imaginary successful academic career, however uncertain, is inherent in academic working lives (Grey, 1994; Knights & Clarke, 2014). Studies have demonstrated how the hope that 'future work opportunities may follow' (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013, p.10) compels academics to personally invest in and freely discipline themselves (Foucault, 1982). For contingent academics who feel deeply the impact of the changes in higher education, the forward-looking orientation of hope drives their commitment and nurtures their affective strength to sustain precarity. Hope labour thus becomes a central career strategy (Fleming, 2022), one that contingent academics willingly and enthusiastically (Berlant, 2011) undertake for what is thought to be an intense

but short-term period until permanency and a better future are achieved. Yet, the historic Covid-19 global outbreak abruptly disrupted this anticipated future, bringing threats to life, restrictions on mobility, and an added layer of pervasive sense of insecurity and uncertainty to contingent academic working lives.

In this paper, we mobilise Alain Badiou's (2005; 2006; 2009) theoretical work on the event to explore how contingent academics experience hope labour during the prolonged Covid-19 period. For Badiou, the event is defined as something unpredictable that escapes traditional classification and disrupts the status quo. It creates, as a result, an elusive present that renders our taken-for-granted coordinates insufficient and demands a response to proceed. We therefore ask, 'how do contingent academics experience and respond to hope labour during the prolonged uncertainty of the Covid-19 event?' Through interviews with forty contingent academics in the United Kingdom over the Covid-19 period, we unravel the process of enquiry in which our participants engage as they try to make sense of this disorienting present.

Theoretically, we build on and advance existing research on hope labour not to examine the commitment of the subject to hurtful discourses and norms that already coordinate its possibilities, as in previous research (e.g. Clarke & Knights, 2015; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020), but to examine the commitment of the subject to change in the situation that constitutes it, to the 'truth of the event' (Badiou, 2005) that allows for the possibility of a counter-ideological understanding of hope labour. Our analysis demonstrates how the process of enquiry during the Covid-19 event drives a series of subjective responses manifested in 'disaffection' and 'temporal disorientation' of hope. These responses, we argue, challenge the future-oriented logic of hope and its affective investment in a utopian, ideal, academic career. By laying bare the precarity and inequality of hope labour, we show how positive and enthusiastic feelings give way to feelings of disillusionment, demoralisation and collective feelings of solidarity. In turn, the shifted priorities of the daily struggles, related to gendered

care, surviving, and self-preserving, redirect the future, aspirational logic of hope to the present and the mundane.

In what follows, we first discuss the literature on hope labour and contingent academic careers in the neoliberal university. We then present Badiou's work on the event and explain how it offers the possibility to theorise the commitment of the subject to change through a process of enquiry. After discussing our empirical research, the findings illustrate the experiences of hope labour of contingent academics over the disruption of the Covid-19 event. We conclude with a discussion about the implications of the truth event for academic hope labour and contingent academic careers in the neoliberal university.

Hope labour, contingent academic careers and Covid-19

The foundations of hope labour have been laid out by social scientists in creative and cultural industries who studied how attachment and commitment to work are portrayed as emancipatory and empowering (Duffy, 2016; Fast, Ornebring & Karlsson, 2016; Gregg, 2015; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013; Terranova, 2013). Hope encapsulates the human condition of moving from a state of 'not-yet-being' into a state of being-more or being-fulfilled (Schumacher, 2003). Such desirable future-orientated projections are imaginary – 'always *irrealis*, … that is non-factual or non-actual' (Smith & Sparkes, 2005, p.1095) – and therefore elusive and intangible (Miyazaki, 2006). They are historically specific in that individuals draw on some condition of the past or present, some experience or idea one would like to see realised (Bloch, 1986).

Broadly, studies of academic working lives have documented how the fantasy of a successful academic career reflects an idealised view of academia as a lifelong vocation marked by substantial occupational freedom and flexibility (Clarke, Knights & Jarvis, 2012). In the last decades, academic careers have been profoundly reshaped largely due to the adoption of neoliberal modes of governance premised on the belief in market supremacy as the mechanism for enhancing performance and productivity (Butler & Spoelstra, 2012; Shore &

Wright, 2000). This shift brought about increasing marketisation (Muller-Camen & Salzgeber, 2005), corporatisation (Huzzard, Benner, & Karreman, 2017) and precarisation (Bristow et al., 2019; Smyth, 2017) of academic labour and have intensified uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety in academic life (Clarke & Knights, 2015; Collinson, 2003; Knights & Clarke, 2014). Academics work under enormous pressure to perform to meet 'the real or imagined demands of others' (Knights & Willmott, 1999, p. 72). This means that achieving what is conventionally considered a successful academic career with relatively clear stages from contingency to permanency to becoming a senior member of the profession (Spina et al., 2022) is dependent on continuing accomplishment and often highly demanding targets and is only ever realisable as at best a tenuous, uncertain and temporary state. This renders the academic self fundamentally fragile and insecure (Grey, 1994).

Nonetheless, career success is often highly desirable for those who wish to pursue academic working lives, resulting in an ongoing pursuit of the ideal academic self that is 'forever illusive if not entirely illusory' (Knights & Clarke, 2014, p.352). On the promise of 'future career rewards' (Ross, 2003, p.142), hope labour or work undertaken in anticipation of realising the idealised, successful academic self becomes an inducement that seems extremely compelling and seductive. Through continuous attentiveness to research, professional activities and the voluntary efforts dedicated to advancing their scholarly area, academics freely discipline themselves (Foucault, 1982). Hope labour is naturalised and reproduced as liberating and meaningful, a 'labour of love' (Clark & Knight, 2012), which validates over-commitment. Academics are encouraged to think that they are in charge of their own destiny and act as 'entrepreneurs of the self' to develop their careers everywhere and all the time (Gill, 2010), displacing all other goals and relationships. This preoccupation with the realisation of the idealised academic self remoulds all spheres of life (Fleming, 2014). It leads to the 'invisibilisation' (Rottenberg, 2018, p.125) of gender, class and racial inequalities that no

longer seem to have a place in their constructed realities. Inequalities, as a result, become unspeakable as individuals lack the ability to articulate them (Gill, 2014).

In these circumstances, for academics on contingent contracts who lack formal recognition and seek to transition from the periphery to the core of their profession (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019), the forward-looking orientation of hope fuels their persistence and continuous engagement. Hope labour becomes a defining career strategy to enhance their 'personal brand' (Fleming, 2022, p.1997), which presupposes the management of temporality through an intense but hopefully short-term period towards a permanent contract. The economic framework of their work and material circumstances are therefore considered as part of an implicit strategy that reconciles the promise of an idealised, successful career with the lack of its immediate fulfilment (Alacovska, 2019; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020). Moreover, this temporal orientation of hope labour involves a continuous affective investment in the utopian dream of the ideal, successful academic career (Berlant, 2011; Munro, 2012). Enthusiasm and passion for engaging in hope labour are central to contingent staff (Busso & Rivetti, 2014), as they need moral strength to resist precarity, heavy workloads, and low and uncertain wages (Vatansever, 2022). In such hard-working conditions, fulfilling the expectations of the becoming self helps to disavow the affective burden of their own precarity, raising self-appreciation and offering a sense of social significance. For all those reasons, contingent academics become complicit in labouring ceaselessly on themselves.

Focusing on contingent academics provides unique opportunities for empirically examining what happens to hope labour – a normative neoliberal belief underpinned by a forward-looking orientation with affective attachments in a utopian future ideal academic career – over the time of the Covid-19 event. While Covid-19 initially seemed like an emergency to be immediately contained, protracted lockdowns and restrictions led to ongoing struggles with existential threats to lives, livelihoods and personal relationships creating an

uncertain and elusive present situation. In universities, the lack of international mobility and hiring freezes dovetailed with the expansion of student intake, leading to a growing proportion of insecure 'gig' jobs within academia (Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022, p.13) that increased reliance on contingent academics (Erickson, Hanna, & Walker, 2021). As academic work moved from campuses to homes, demands encroached on social and personal lives, further dissolving the boundaries between work and private time and space, reinforcing traditional gender roles and responsibilities (Vincent, Lopes, Monroe, et al., 2024). In turn, the proliferation of the utilisation of digital platforms exacerbated workloads, which induced even greater uncertainty and anxiety, as contingent academics typically receive less support than their full-time counterparts (Ivancheva et al., 2020). In this paper, we therefore aim to understand how contingent academics experience hope labour in this disrupted context, characterised by widespread and prolonged uncertainty and loss. Drawing on Badiou's work on the event, we explore how the disruption or the 'in-between time' of the Covid-19 event complicates the future orientated logic of hope.

Badiou's theoretical framework: Event and the truth process

The work of Alain Badiou has been mentioned, mostly in passing, in critical studies of change and transformation in organisation studies (e.g., Essers, Boehm & Contu, 2009; Parker & Fotaki, 2014) to examine the emphasis and the limits of managerial change in neoliberalism. Scholars explain how contemporary ways of thinking about change are translated into managerial recipes for, for instance, leadership and engagement in employee empowerment and commitment (e.g., De Cock & Boehm, 2007; Kenny, 2009) that ultimately ensure that everything will effectively remain the same. In other words, such managerial changes maintain the status quo and do not disrupt existing power structures. However, in the context of Covid-19, Badiou's work is helpful because its focus on the event as a rare occurrence or rupture

makes certain situations so difficult to categorise that the multiplicity of their consequences becomes impossible to predict and contain.

According to Badiou (2005) every world or situation, which refers to what surrounds us and the ensemble of possibilities that can and cannot emerge, is organised in a particular way, reflecting the sociohistorical conditions in place at a given time, or what Badiou calls 'being', the neoliberal status quo in our case. When the state of the situation is called into question, as in the case of Covid-19 where 'even laissez-faire capitalism appears to have put itself into a temporary stall' (Howard, 2021, p.85), the event designates the sudden, unexpected, and incomprehensible appearance of something that has no place in it, revealing the radical contingency of organising the situation. Events disrupt the order of continuity, suggesting the limits of what can be represented, named, and categorised by the existing resources. In Badiou's theoretical framework, the event reveals 'the edge of the void', that is, that aspect of the situation that has no interest in preserving the status quo. This aspect of the situation is at once 'presented' but not 'represented' in the status quo, located at the limits of currently available formal resources. In other words, the members of the group belong to the situation but are excluded from the status quo, such as, for instance, the proletariat in Marx's bourgeois societies, immigrants in the neoliberal society, or contingent academics in the neoliberal university. The border status of this group exposes it to uncounted, inconsistent ways of being in the situation (Hallward, 2003).

The consequences of the event are 'indiscernible and unclassifiable for knowledge' (Badiou 2012, p.338). Drawing on Lacan (2006), Badiou argues that the event 'punches a hole' in knowledge structures or the status quo that disturbs existing coordinates of an individual's existence, and the possibility of change is all but invisible. Discerning the new practices depends on the subject's orientation towards the event. To use Badiou's vocabulary, new practices demand a sensitivity and openness to the 'truth of the event' (Badiou 2005, p.46). In

this way, the subject says 'yes' to the event and engages in the construction of a generic truth or a counter-ideological understanding of power relations in society. For Badiou, truth is what contests power and is in the interests of all those subjugated by those in power. As such, truth is 'egalitarian' (Badiou 2012, p.409), defined in terms of universals that would hold true for all people, regardless of differences, for instance, in social class, ethnicity, or gender (Earley, 2014).

Nonetheless, no matter the possibilities the truth entails to disrupt the status quo, what matters is our subjective orientation towards the event or how we read the situation. The 'forcing' activity of the subject establishes how the change that is taking place, the undecidable, can be decided upon, and that it is legitimate to carry on with it. This subjective encounter with the event is what Badiou describes as a fidelity procedure, a retroactive process of enquiry that renders insufficient the taken-for-granted coordinates of our lives, and a decision will be necessary to proceed (Badiou, 2005, p.335). This, in turn, may result in the establishment of a new situation that is irreconcilable with dominant knowledge and requires new discourse and practices in personal ethics and behaviour. However, not everyone experiences the event with the same strength. For Badiou, an event can evoke a range of subjective responses, as the becoming subject is always in process. The becoming subject can be faithful to the event, while the reactive subject contains the form of the faithful subject in a subordinate form, producing a confused present. Finally, the subject may deny the truth of the event, embracing rigid conformity to the past rather than unfolding the consequences of the event.

This is why Badiou describes fidelity as an operation and a process of enquiry rather than a state of mind (Watkin, 2017). The series of investigations is going to be infinite. The subject never knows in advance what might count as being connected to the event. The subject, as a result, remains suspended in this 'in-between time', an interim time of temporary and provisional, a period between two heterogeneous orders (O' Sullivan, 2009). In this article, we

unravel this process of enquiry by exploring contingent academics' subjective experiences of hope labour and the series of their investigations as they navigate the elusive and uncertain present situation during the Covid-19 event.

Methodology

Research context and data collection

The data presented here are part of a broader study on the work and career experiences of contingent academics in universities in the United Kingdom (UK) during the Covid-19 event. We conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with contingent academics from September 2020 to March 2021, a period which partly coincided with the unexpected, second Covid-19 lockdown in the UK. In the UK, one of the largest academic job markets worldwide (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020), one third of all academic staff working in universities are employed on fixed-term contracts, and many institutions employ staff on zero-hour contracts and hourly paid contracts (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019/2020). At the time of the interviews, academic work had moved from campuses to home (online), inducing further uncertainty, as it seriously limited interaction, networking and 'exposure' opportunities for contingent staff.

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling methods (Silverman, 2010), utilising a written call for participation that was posted on social media and academic and trade union networks. We obtained a sample covering a range of UK university types (e.g., research or teaching focused, including elite Russell Group universities). We also strove to ensure demographic diversity to capture the anticipated heterogeneity of participant experience and richness of the sample population rather than to create statistically representative groupings (Bowen, 2008). Our sample reflects contingent academics' diversity in terms of contractual duties (teaching, research, or both), age group, country of origin, career stage and personal situation, e.g. having children or not. Participants'

ages varied from the early 20s to the late 50s. Three participants were still finishing their PhDs at the time of the interview while working in teaching and/or research at at least one university (some worked at more than one university simultaneously). The career stage also varied from early career academics with less than a year's experience to academics who had been in the sector for 17 years. Although our call was open to all academics on contingent contracts across all disciplines, 34 of our participants are women based in the Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines. The overrepresentation of women in our sample might be explained by the fact that women are overrepresented in precarious academic work (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). In turn, the overrepresentation of women might, for example, be the result of their greater presence on networks related to academic careers (Villeseche, Meliou & Jha, 2022) or they may be more inclined to participate in scientific research (Whitaker, Stevelink & Fear, 2017). Table 1 details the background of the participants. In the findings, participants are identified only by their participant number (Participant 1–40) to ensure privacy.

Table 1. Participants' demographic data

	Country of origin	Gender	Age range	Caring responsibilities	Years in contingent roles	University type *	Discipline
P1	British	F	31-40	None	7	1	Humanities
P2	British	F	41-50	None	5.5	1	Health Sciences
P3	Indian	F	31-40	None	3	2	Social sciences
P4	British	M	31-40	1 child	5	1	Health Sciences
P5	Spanish	F	31-40	relatives	6	2	Humanities
P6	Australian	F	41-50	2 children	12	1	Health Sciences
P7	Indian	F	31-40	None	4	1	Health Sciences
P8	British	F	23-30	1 child	4.5	1	Engineering/ Computer Sciences
P9	British	F	41-50	1 child	7	1	Humanities
P10	British	F	51-60	None	6	1,2	Humanities
P11	British	F	31-40	None	7	1	Humanities

P12	Greek	F	23-30	None	3	1	Engineering/ Computer Sciences
P13	British	F	31-40	1 child	3	1	Humanities
P14	British/American	F	31-40	1 child	9	1	Humanities
P15	British	F	31-40	1 child	10	1	Social sciences
P16	British	F	51-60	None	7	2	Humanities
P17	French	F	41-50	2 children	17	1,2	Social Sciences
P18	British	F	31-40	None	2	1	Health sciences
P19	Greek	F	21-30	None	1	1	Social Sciences
P20	Brazilian	F	51-60	None	10	2	Social Sciences
P21	British	F	31-40	None	1	1	Life Sciences
P22	British	F	21-30	None	3	1	Social Sciences
P23	Thai	F	41-50	1 child	14	1	Humanities
P24	Italian	F	21-30	None	0.5	1	Social Sciences
P25	British	M	31-40	1 child	5	1	Life Sciences
P26	North American	F	31-40	None	2	2	Humanities
P27	Finnish	F	41-50	None	0.5	2	Social Sciences
P28	British	F	41-50	1 child	11	1	Social Sciences
P29	British	F	31-40	None	11	1	Health Sciences
P30	British	F	31-40	Partner	8	1	Health Sciences
P31	Austrian	F	21-30	None	10	2,1	Humanities
P32	British	F	41-50	None	3	1	Social Sciences
P33	British	F	31-40	None	10	1	Health Sciences
P34	British	F	21-30	2 children; relative	2	1	Humanities
P35	British	F	31-40	1 child	6	1	Social sciences
P36	Spanish	F	31-40	None	4	2	Humanities
P37	Malaysian	M	21-30	None	3	1	Social Sciences
P38	Nigerian	M	21-30	None	2	1	Social Sciences
P39	Scottish	M	31-40	None	3	1	Humanities
P40	British	M	41-50	None	12	1	Humanities

* 1- research intensive university; 2 – teaching intensive university

Interviews, ranging from 45 to 120 minutes, were conducted via video conference (Zoom and Microsoft Teams). All the interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. As we aimed to gather vivid accounts of the participants' experiences, we took care to ensure that the questions were open-ended and focused on situations and activities in their worlds (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Participants were asked about their career histories, current employment and the impact of the Covid-19 event on their work and life, including institutional support received, future career plans, job search process and psychological wellbeing.

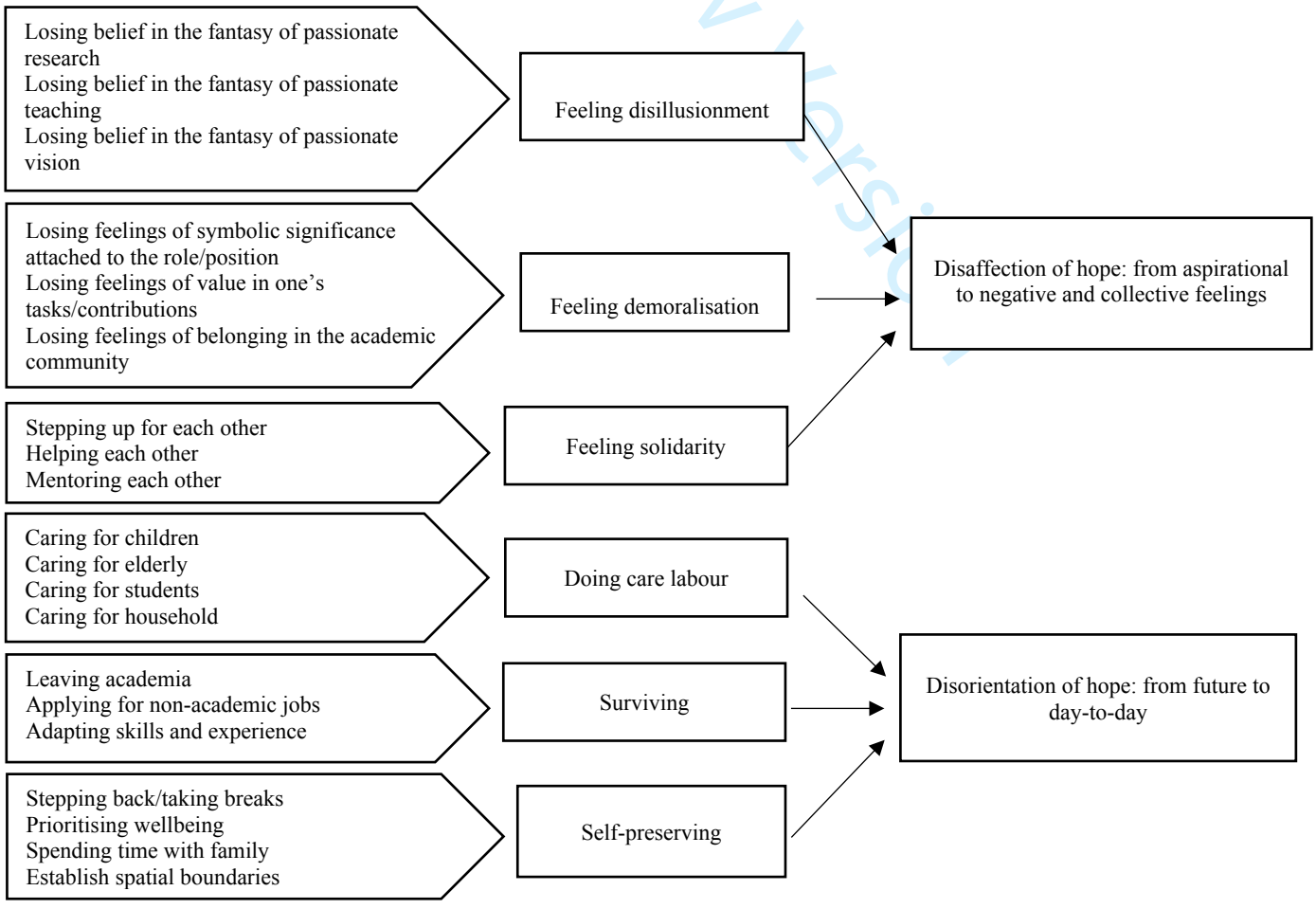
Data analysis

The focus of this article on exploring contingent academics' experiences and responses to hope labour during the Covid-19 period was driven by our data. During the interviews, we observed much concern and distress regarding the realisation of an academic career, so we decided to dig deeper into it in our analysis. As such, drawing on Badiou's theoretical framework of the event, our analytical aim was to place participants in the present situation to understand their subjective orientation to hope labour that fuels the fantasy of the idealised academic career.

First, data were imported into NVivo12, after which every interview was coded to identify relevant themes related to the experiences and meanings of hope labour instigated by the Covid-19 event. These first-order codes were local, in the sense that they were grounded in the participants' accounts. Participants distanced themselves and questioned the meanings and beliefs underpinning hope labour, such as normative assumptions related to passionate research and teaching. Themes, where respondents identified with hope labour during the Covid-19 event, were also evident in participants' accounts. We bracketed passages relevant to these emergent first-order codes, drawing on the literature and extended the coding framework to include any new themes. We adopted 'progressive focusing', moving from defining fairly loosely empirical codes to more specific ones as the analysis progressed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997).

In the second stage of analysis, we aimed to identify how these 'uncategorized' (Badiou, 2005) words and practices that did not belong to the vocabulary of the neoliberal status quo, reproducing the normative ideology of hope labour, shaped the responses and actions of our participants. In other words, we identified in participants' accounts what elements of academic hope labour were challenged during the Covid-19 period, the consequences that unfolded and the decisions taken. Finally, after multiple rounds of team discussion and re-grouping of codes and themes, in the third stage, we aggregated them into two main themes that set the underpinning assumptions that normalise hope labour into question and explain how our participants experienced and negotiated academic hope labour over the Covid-19 event. Table 2 outlines our data structure, providing insights into how second order themes and aggregated dimensions were developed from descriptive codes.

Table 2. Data Structure



Our findings present the experiences of disaffection and temporal disorientation of hope that the becoming subject produces in fidelity to the event (Badiou, 2005). Our focus is not to compare or generalise participants' experiences, but to provide evidence about our participants' subjective orientations to academic hope labour. In this sense, articulating the concepts of the event and truth process in dialogue with the data provides us with ideas for the theoretical advancement of the phenomenon of hope labour. We provide below quotations substantiating our findings and offering sufficient contextual detail to enable readers to understand the reality as constructed by the participants.

Positionality and reflexivity

In conducting this research, we align with O'Keefe and Courtois (2024) and others who explore academic precarity through the lived experiences of those affected (e.g. Buckle, 2021; Ivancheva & Keating, 2020; Vatansever, 2020). While now on ongoing, permanent contracts, we have both experienced academic precarity that resulted in non-linear career paths, migration and its impact on personal lives and financial stability.

We entirely managed this project and conducted all the interviews. We received a small amount of external funding, which covered the transcription of interviews and participant remuneration during the second stage of the wider project (Warnock, Taylor & Horton, 2022). During interviews, we disclosed our current positions and prior contingent experiences, fostering an interactive dialogue (Cassell, Radcliffe & Malik, 2019; Cotterill, 1992), where accounts of experiences were shared between the interviewer and the participant in a two-way manner, creating a sense of partial common ground (Pullen, 2006). Motivated by our own experiences of contingent academic work, we aimed to give space and voice to those navigating precarity in academic careers.

Findings

Our findings demonstrate the process of enquiry as our participants negotiate their idealised career aspirations during the Covid-19 event. Hope labour is underpinned by a future-forward looking orientation with affective attachments to the realisation of an imaginary successful academic career. Our analysis shows how the sudden and prolonged Covid-19 event disrupted our participants' hopeful aspirations, driving a series of subjective responses, manifested in the disaffection of hope and temporal disorientation of hope.

Disaffection of hope

Disaffection of hope emerged as a central aggregate theme in our findings. It captures the affective disruption through which the normative belief that sustains and normalises hope as 'passionate attachment' (Gill, 2010, p.41) is called into question during the Covid-19 event. For contingent academics, hope labour involves an affective investment in the idealised career success, which requires a highly individualistic subject driven by optimism and positive feelings (Berlant, 2011), disavowing heavy workloads and uncertain wages in the continuous pursuit of the becoming self. Badiou (2006) argues that it is through affect that a subject recognises that it participates in the truth process, even without having actively chosen it. During the Covid-19 event, disaffection of hope reflected a shift towards negative and unenthusiastic *feelings of disillusionment* and *demoralisation,* as well as *emergent feelings of collective solidarity.*

Feeling disillusioned describes a becoming subject who has lost belief in the fantasy of passionate research, teaching or academic vision that fuels and justifies hope labour. The account of P28, a contingent academic for eleven years, currently in a research-intensive university in a Social Sciences subject, is telling of the new situation that emerged over the Covid-19 event. During the interview, discussing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on her

career, P28 juxtaposed the past with the present situation, expressing her disillusionment with the idealised belief of passionate research and academic vision:

> I was going along with that. I was like I'm going to be a professor and I'm going to have a big research project of millions of euros or pounds. I was talking like this. And now I just feel like what the hell? What is the point? What do I want to have a big research project on? Just like the point of all this garbage was missed. And I'm willing to work but I'm not willing to pretend I think the work is some fucking amazing thing that needs me to be. (P28)

Likewise, the account of P5, a contingent academic for six years in a teaching-intensive university, underscored her growing disillusionment with the dream of the idealised academic career during the prolonged interruption and uncertainty of the Covid-19 event. Having worked in industry before and alongside her university teaching, P5 drew on her own professional network to support and enrich the teaching programme. In the interview, when asked about her work and life situation during the lockdowns, P5 reflected on how this period prompted a wider shift in perspective. Her account reveals the slow fraying and fading of the fantasy as she voiced her cynicism and disenchantment with the idealised belief of passionate engagement:

> I felt a little bit cynical and thought well does it make sense for me to be giving all these contacts and all this effort to this programme when there's no real sense of opportunity here for me or no real sense of becoming a part of staff, in reality. (P5)

Similar feelings of disillusionment were shared by P13, a Humanities academic in a research-intensive university who, at the time of the interview, had been employed on contingent contracts for three years. In her account, she described the fantasy of the idealised successful academic career that validated hope labour as '*belong[ing] to a pre-COVID sort of imagination'*. The extended workload during the Covid-19 period, along with her maternity leave and the subsequent sharing of this intimate experience (Lupu, 2021; Boncori & Smith, 2019), prompted a reflection about the overwork and the social meaning attached to her role. Her increasing realisation of how 'superfluous' her position was signaled her disaffection:

> I did so much extra and so much was this extracurricular work with students, but now it's just trying to get these students through the course. And I think that possibly has quite a sort of knock-on effect, like when everyone's at the coalface, like suddenly my

role seems very, like a little bit superfluous. (P13)

Feelings of demoralisation emerged as disaffection of hope is further evidenced in the collapse of the symbolic social significance and worth of the idealised successful academic career that created hopeful attachments to recognition and belonging and legitimised hope labour. The account of P20*,* with over a decade of experience on contingent contracts in a teaching-intensive university, exemplified this sentiment of demoralisation as she states, *'I'm very conscious I'm filling all the gaps. So, that's the way I see myself, my position there'* (P20). P17 with contingent contracts for seventeen years in Humanities, explained how the Covid-19 event exacerbated feelings of devaluation and fear, further challenging her perception of self-worth:

> Sometimes I want to say devalued or unvalued, but that would be the case if there was a value to start with, which I don't feel there is. The pandemic has really increased that because the hard work has increased, the expectations have increased, the pressures increased, the anxiety has increased that you may lose your job, and equally how you're valued hasn't changed. (P17)

Disaffection of hope heightened sentiments of invisibility and lack of belonging in the academic community. P27, who had a teaching contract in a teaching-intensive Business School, explains how in response to the announcement of the Covid-19 lockdown and the shift to online learning in universities, she felt insignificant and established boundaries to distance herself and avoid emotional engagement:

> I felt that because I was just a small grid in the system, I wasn't that important. I felt that I'm just hired to do these modules so I'm not going to get too involved in this emotionally. I kept a distance and just observed because the pay is not that much. (P27)

As part of the disaffection of hope, our findings also reveal the emergence of feelings *of solidarity*, calling into question the emphasis on individual responsibility reflected in the neoliberal discourse of hope labour. The process of enquiry over the prolonged Covid-19 event sharpened the visibility of the precarity and inequality of academic hope labour. For Badiou, the truth brings about a 'new egalitarian maxim' (Badiou, 2006, p.86) and is generic; it cuts

across differences and is open to all. It is indifferent to all forms of self-interest. Our participants explained how they enacted and received collective practices of support and solidarity as *'the group and the PI have done a brilliant job" (P12)* that contravene the focus on individualistic career strategies of the enterprising individual intended by the pursuit of academic hope labour. The account of P11 is indicative:

> We've done a lot of helping with each other. I have said I've had extra marking because when people have struggled, people have stepped up. And the most extraordinary people have stepped up. So, we've all done a little bit of stepping up for each other and a little bit of helping each other out. (P11)

Similarly, P13, a contingent academic for three years, explained how:

> There's informal support, particularly from one colleague who I'm close to, but she also acts as a kind of mentor. And I feel very lucky to have that, but also frustrated that that kind of unrecognized support is necessary. Like it's really a case that she goes above and beyond what she's contracted to do in order to look out for me. (P13)

However, as Badiou explains, not everyone is absorbed by the event. In the elusive and obscure present during the Covid-19 event, hope labour continued to feel coherent for some participants. The account of P7, a contingent academic for four years in Health Sciences working in a research-intensive institution, demonstrated her ongoing emotional investment in the fantasy of idealised passionate research as she worked ceaselessly over the prolonged uncertainty of the Covid-19 that greatly impacted her research funding: *'I want to focus on the research rather than teaching. I wouldn't have worked so hard and got two extra degrees. My passion is research, my talent is research, I've worked really hard to get where I am'*. In the same vein, P11, who has had contingent contracts for eleven years in Humanities and was employed in a research-intensive university at the time of the interview, described continuing to work for 'zero pay' after losing her job. Her narrative demonstrated the deep affective investment in hope labour, which sustains the presumption of active agency:

> By the time I lost my job in April 2021, until I started my new job in January 2022, I was working full-time hours, at least a nine to five, if not longer hours, for zero pay. I was organising their research seminar series so I was the convener for that. Because it's the right thing to do. I've always been driven by what's the right thing to do rather than

> by what my contract dictates and that's probably a bit naïve, but as I see it, I'll always be very loyal to [Z University] because they've created opportunities for me, obviously, I've made the most of them. So it's more than a job, it's almost like pay back. Almost like volunteering. (P11)

As these excerpts show, unlike the disillusionment and demoralisation described by most of our participants, some continued to rigidly sustain hope labour. According to Badiou (2009), an obscure transformation entails the negation of the event that is in process. The accounts of some of our participants demonstrate the affective attachment to hope labour, which is intrinsically rewarding and serves as a trade-off mechanism that offsets the uncertainty of securing a permanent contract and the hope for a better future.

To sum up, disaffection of hope signals the imminent experience or a sign that a new present situation is being created. It captures the affective disruption over the Covid-19 event through which our participants began to question the affective investment in the idealised career success that validates hope labour. In response to the disruption brought about by the Covid-19 event, our participants experienced disillusionment and demoralisation as the fantasy of the aspirational academic career began to fade. At the same time, emerging feelings of collective solidarity highlight a departure from the preoccupation with the neoliberal individual responsibility, further unsettling hope labour.

Temporal disorientation of hope

Temporal disorientation of hope was identified as a nuanced aggregate theme in the accounts of our participants. It captures the temporal disruption of the future-forward orientation encapsulated in hope as an aspirational endeavour. For contingent academics, this future-oriented logic of hope normalises hope labour as a 'short-term' career strategy that sustains the fantasy of the idealised career success yet to come. Our analysis shows that the prolonged uncertainty of the Covid-19 event shifted priorities and oriented hope to the demands of the present. Our findings unearth how the mundane, day-to-day struggles of '*doing care labour'*,

'surviving' and *'self-preserving'* over the Covid-19 period gave rise to an ordinary and practical, unspectacular hope.

Doing care labour captures the unpaid, gendered care work in which our participants were caught as they tried to keep up with contradictory and ongoing demands during the Covid-19 event. The lockdowns exposed entrenched gender inequalities that remain unspeakable in the imaginary belief of the disembodied ideal academic (Gill, 2010) with no external responsibilities and the agency to exercise 'personal control of time' (Lewis et al., 2017:361). The shift from campuses to home extended workdays and relocated academic labour into crowded domestic spaces, effectively transforming one form of unpaid, invisible labour into another. Participants with caring responsibilities reported heightened challenges in juggling academic work, childcare, and home-schooling. As P23, a mother on contingent contracts for fourteen years, explained, *'I don't have a work-life balance. Now I'm homeschooling my daughter. I'm working mainly from my bedroom, and she's here all the time*'. In a similar vein, the account of P6, a mother of two and a contingent academic in Health Sciences, is illustrative of how the idealised successful academic self is displaced by the gendered realities of the present:

> I think that it mattered that I had kids at home, because when I normally get to go to a conference, I get to just go and be academic me and I don't always have to be mum me at the same time. And so, it just meant that I couldn't fully engage in. I didn't get as much out of it and I was distracted, and I felt like it was more like, ticked that box, I did one this year. (P6)

P5, who had been on precarious contracts for several years, explained how caring responsibilities for her parents shaped her everyday reality during the lockdowns:

> burnt out, I think I was really extremely tired and sleeping up to 12 hours a day, because of some personal issues with my parents' illnesses that I have to deal with at a distance and going back and forth. (P5)

Many of our participants further described the heightened need for pastoral support and the depletion embedded in the gendered labour during the Covid-19 event as '*the pandemic has*

just made everything so stressful and scary, and the actual workload in itself has just exploded, a lot of it very pastoral stuff as well, there's just so much more pastoral care. *It's mentally, emotionally exhausting to actually do all that kind of care*' (P32). The excerpt below from P26 is telling of the emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) and extra, unpaid work she engaged in to care for students in ways that extended well beyond what would typically be expected from a contingent academic previously, under 'normal' circumstances:

> There was just a lot more support needed for students, so I make calls to students as well, so I found that, you know, the interventions that I would have with students were more frequent because with the pandemic, you know, everything was just changing, and students needed a lot more support, so I think that that emotional care side of my role increased greatly. (P26)

The temporal disorientation of hope is further evidenced in *surviving*. Surviving encapsulates the practical, everyday 'local adaptations' (Badiou, 2006, p.82) employed by our participants as they adjust to the present situation. As the taken-for-granted coordinates began to collapse during the Covid-19 event, surviving emerged as a mode of existence (Alacovska, 2019), encompassing efforts to adapt academic skills, pursue non-academic career paths, or leave academia altogether.

In her account, P12 an academic in STEM who had been on contingent contracts for three years, and had just relocated to start a new, fixed term contract job when the pandemic happened, described how the Covid-19 event has influenced her decision to reevaluate and readjust her skills to pursue a career in the private sector:

> Covid made me realise plans are nothing. It has definitely changed where I thought that I would be. You can plan and something like this virus can come and break everything down. I recently attended a work event and during the networking session, there was someone from [X company] who was interested in what I do. I have a chat next Friday to ask some questions about industry to get a feel of how industry is, to make a decision. (P12)

The process of enquiry 'forces decision' (Badiou, 2005, p.430). Some of our participants decided to leave academia for better career prospects and financial rewards. These opportunities were considered more by younger contingent academics. Studies on the life

course (Meliou & Mallett, 2021; Spina et al, 2022) have shown that opportunities for a career change may be reduced for older contingent academics who may experience exclusion and employers' resistance to engage older workers. P33, an academic in Health Sciences employed on contingent contracts for ten years, explained*: 'I see friends who are dropping out of academia, but the pandemic has just been a complete accelerator, the amount of people who are dropping out has just trebled from the days that I know. In an area that's a problem anyway, the pandemic has just finished people off* (P33). The narrative of P37, a business and management scholar who had been employed on contingent contracts for three years, was illustrative of his decision to change the current state of things:

> I'm actually leaving X University at the end of this month to take up a permanent contract with a private sector organisation. My contract with X University was for 24 months, a fixed term contract. So, along the way, an offer came for a permanent role, and therefore I decided to take up the private sector organisation offer. (P37)

The account of P8, who had been on contingent contracts for over four years in Computer Sciences, was indicative of the temporal disorientation, the 'in between-time' created by the Covid-19 event that demanded the meaning of desires and fantasies to be rethought. Her narrative reflects an ongoing negotiation between the imagined future of an idealised academic career, *'I'd intended that I would have an academic career'* and the precarious uncertainty of her present situation. She dealt with the closure of possibilities imposed by the Covid-19 event and decides to leave academia and take a job in the civil service.

> I've literally debated this. I've debated in my own head, I've spoken to my husband, spoken to my family, like, don't know what to do, just really, really struggled to make the decision. I was already conflicted when I applied for the job, because I do like academia. And I really do think, on reflection, that a lot of the reason that I'm leaving academia, isn't because I want to leave academia, it's because I just can't deal with any more of the precarious stuff, and all of the rubbish that comes with it. (P8)

As the above example demonstrates, in the elusive and uncertain Covid-19 present situation, such a decision did not come easily; it was both painful and ambivalent. This is also evidenced in the account of P10, who had been on contingent contracts for six years in a Humanities

discipline, and who continued to apply for academic jobs, while also applying for non-academic ones:

> There's been this sort of forced stop for reflection. I keep applying for things, lots of things as they come up, and have also actually started to apply for non-academic jobs. That's both for my own sense of self and also financially. I'm sure it's connected to the pandemic too (P10).

The temporal disorientation of hope was finally evident in acts of *self-preserving*. Our participants expressed how working from home allowed them to mitigate the intensification and extensification of work across time and space as *'I don't have to travel anywhere'* (P20). They engage in practices of self-care: stepping back, prioritising personal wellbeing, spending time with family and establishing spatial boundaries. Such practices of 'caring for myself' remind us that it 'is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (Lorde, 1988, p.70). Self-preserving is thus not about the neoliberal belief of the self-enterprising individual who accepts responsibility for her own happiness and wellbeing. It is about finding ways to exist in a world that can be depleting (Ahmed, 2017; Meliou et al., 2024). Our participants had to look after themselves because they are not looked after, their being is not cared for, supported, or protected. The account of P5, an academic employed on contingent contracts for six years, exemplifies how Covid-19 enabled her to take a step back to support herself:

> Well in some ways Covid-19 has improved my work/life balance. I retreated a little bit and Covid helped me in that sense because I was involved in this cycle of organising things and webinars and events, and teaching and all that. (P5)

Likewise, P12 explained how she prioritised her wellbeing over the Covid-19 period to protect herself:

> I started exercising as well and going for walks, I got into…it's called expression and exercise at the same time. I think I spent a lot of my time that I have at home trying to find my values and understand more myself. (P12)

Spending time with family was expressed in the account of P25, a father who had been on contingent contracts in the Life Sciences for five years. His narrative highlighted how the

uncertainty and restrictions of the Covid-19 event offered an opportunity for him to pause and spend time with his son:

> I'd say that the childcare has been nice. It was nice spending more time with my son because I wouldn't have been able to spend those whole days with him so that was a positive. (P25)

While self-preserving was valued in our participants' accounts, for many women with caring responsibilities, this often meant having more time to juggle different forms of unpaid, gendered labour. P17, a contingent academic working in two universities and caring for two children, explained how the Covid-19 event disruption shifted her focus '*I'm the casual worker and he's the main breadwinner. So, that divides it. I had most of the childcare responsibilities, but I also had a job to do. I ended up doing childcare daytime and work night-time with some napping here and there'.* Taking breaks and setting limits on overwork translated into more time for household chores:

> Working from home has been good in terms of boundaries because being in your own home sometimes gives you a chance to have breaks. So, in terms of time limits it has been quite good in this respect and I've enjoyed working from home for lots of reasons. It helps manage the work/life balance in a way because you've been able to combine household chores with your working day. In the morning I'm less on pressure to catch up on public transport to then make sure I make it in time for work. So, I can afford to have half an hour margin with my children. (P17)

Many participants also reported how they used spatial arrangements as a form of self-preservation, as institutional support was lacking. This was supported by different resources and self-care acts, such as, for example, using separate computers for work and personal activities, or physically closing the door to a home office at the end of the workday:

> I tried to close the door or using the extra room of the house as an office, so I was just trying to after six to close that door and not go in. (P29)

To conclude, the temporal disorientation of hope reflects a disruption in the future-oriented logic that sustains the fantasy of an idealised academic career success. It captures the everyday struggles that our participants faced as they kept going and persisted through life during the elusive and uncertain present of Covid-19. Hope here is no longer tethered to a distant,

aspirational future but emerges through everyday routines, manifested in gendered labour and practices of surviving and self-preserving that make life liveable in the present.

Discussion

How have contingent academics experienced hope labour during the disruption brought about by Covid-19? Drawing on Badiou's theory of the event, we set out, in this paper, to explore the predicament in which contingent academics found themselves in the present elusive and uncertain situation created by the Covid-19 event. From forty in-depth interviews, we have outlined the responses of contingent academics to the neoliberal normative belief in hope labour. Here, we discuss our contributions to the scholarship on the neoliberal belief in hope labour and contingent academic careers in organisation studies before moving to the conclusion.

A Badiouian process of enquiry and the subject of neoliberalism

Our study contributes to debates in organisation studies about the impact of neoliberalism (e.g. Fleming, 2021) and the commitment and attachment of the subject to the normative belief in hope labour (Alacovksa, 2019; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020). As academic working lives have become saturated with uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety, individuals are turned into entrepreneurs of the self, responsible for increasing their own value and working ceaselessly to produce and maintain their careers. Existing research has shown how hope labour is normalised and reproduced as common sense in the pursuit of the fantasy of the ideal, successful academic career. Underpinned by a forward-looking orientation accompanied by an affective investment in a utopian, hypothetical successful career, hope labour validates self-discipline and over-commitment. Applied specifically to contingent academics who struggle with increased work demands and inadequate compensation, hope labour serves as an inducement for the self to become, structuring how to think and how to feel. It operates as an implicit career strategy, assumed to be short-term, relying on positive feelings of enthusiasm

and passion to sustain the active striving relation to the hopeful future despite onerous conditions. Scholars emphasise the need to examine how such normative beliefs might be contested and reversed (Fleming, 2014). As Clarke and Knights (2015, p.1874) remind us 'nonetheless, power and knowledge effects are never totalizing'.

Extending this premise, our study enriches existing research on the subject's commitment to the neoliberal belief in hope labour by offering a powerful account that considers how to think when the ordinary is disrupted and a new way of 'ordering' (Badiou, 2005) emerges. Drawing on Badiou's philosophy of the event enables us to further our understanding of the neoliberal academia in which contingent academics found themselves during the Covid-19 event, characterised by generalised instability and precarity, when we approach it as an 'evental site', a site that harbours the possibility of change rather than only the threat of destruction. Our study elaborates on the ways contingent academics respond and negotiate the entrenched neoliberal belief in hope labour over the uncertain and elusive period instilled by the Covid-19 event. In contrast to previous work, we demonstrate how the disruption brought about by the Covid-19 event opens a series of investigations that set the commitment and attachment of the subject to hope labour into question. Our study shows how, through the process of enquiry, the subject explores the consequences of what happens in the event and exposes, question by question, a truth which 'groups together all the terms of the situation which are positively connected to the event' Badiou, 2005, p.335).

We argue that the process of enquiry reveals the precarity and inequality underlying hope labour. We develop new theoretical insights by demonstrating how contingent academics respond with disaffection and temporal disorientation. The Covid-19 event compels the inhabitants of the situation to 'invent a new way of being and acting in the situation' (Badiou, 2002, p.42). Amid intensified insecurity and the closing down of future possibilities over the prolonged and uncertain Covid-19 period, the becoming subject feels suspended. Our

contingent academics navigate the tension between the fantasy of realising the ideal successful academic career and the harsh reality of the present situation, as the Covid-19 event is made relevant to the order of knowledge and renders the futurity of hope increasingly elusive. The feeling of active, projective agency sustained by the belief in the hopeful, utopian academic future has been eroded. Positive, optimistic, albeit often cruel, feelings (Berland, 2011), required to maintain hope labour in the neoliberal academia, are weakening and give way to disillusionment and demoralisation. Individualistic career strategies are set aside in favour of emerging collective feelings of solidarity and support. The futurity logic of hope becomes blurred and ambiguous, overshadowed by the physical and emotional tolls of the daily struggles related to care labour, surviving and self-preserving.

However, as the process of enquiry unfolds within the prolonged and uncertain Covid-19 period, not everyone experiences the event in the same way. The Covid-19 event creates an obscure present in which, despite its incoherence, at the level of affect, hope labour may still feel coherent. As our findings show, some participants remain emotionally invested in the idealised academic career success. The new present, Badiou notes, does not destroy the situation, as neoliberal modes of governance are unavoidable today. Rather, it complements the situation by reinforcing or bringing into existence new modes of subjectivity that were non-existent before the event.

The temporal and affective directions of hope labour during the disruption of the Covid-19 event

We have argued that the empirical focus on contingent academics – a group whose voice is sidelined in research on academic careers (Sadlier, 2022) - during the Covid-19 event provides unique opportunities for researching the entrenched neoliberal belief in hope labour. As discussed, hope labour for contingent academics relies on the intentional and purposeful management of time and affect. Hope labour makes contingent academics feel in control of

time, functioning as a short-term strategy and sustaining positive, hopeful feelings in pursuit of the long-term, future fantasy of the idealised career success. The Covid-19 event, however, disrupted these taken-for-granted dynamics. As Badiou explains, the event assumes a future anterior temporality. In our case, this means recognising that Covid-19 'will have been presented' (Badiou, 2005, p. 217), and its consequences cannot be predicted in advance. It thus marks the beginning of a new time, initiating a process of enquiry that demands a series of investigations. The prolonged uncertainty of Covid-19 lockdowns led to ongoing struggles resulting in an indeterminate lived present situation, which, we argue, challenges the normative understanding of hope labour in existing research (e.g. Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2020) by changing the temporal and affective directions of hope.

Specifically, our study highlights and elaborates on the experience of disaffection, marked by a change towards negative and unenthusiastic feelings of disillusionment and demoralisation, as well as emergent feelings of collective solidarity, creating space for envisioning more egalitarian alternatives. The affective power of hope labour embedded in ideas about passion for research, teaching or a broader academic vision, is achieved by drawing the imaginary, desired future into the present, emphasising the potentiality ingrained in the idea of 'not yet' (Miyazaki & Swedberg, 2016). However, our findings demonstrate how these hopeful affects are increasingly undermined. Our contingent academics feel disillusioned and demoralised, living between contradictory affective demands in the confused present that the Covid-19 event brought about. As the process of enquiry unfolds, they feel the degradation of their subjective value and role, finding themselves unable to reproduce any more the requisite positive feelings (Hochschild, 2012). Within this context, the disillusionment triggered, or in some cases exacerbated, by the Covid-19 event gives rise to forms of cynicism and anger, enabling them to project their circumstances outward, rather than internalising them.

Nonetheless, 'hope is a story that is needed when confronting an uncertain future [….] the attainment of hope does not necessarily equal future happiness' (Genda, 2016, p.119-120). Temporal disorientation of hope encapsulates the change of direction of hope from the future to the present and the mundane. When the event happens, 'Badiou's subject lives in a time that is entirely saturated by the present, a time without promise, inheritance, or reserve' (Hallward, 2003, p.158). Our findings show how the demands of the present, the day-to-day struggles of 'doing care labour', 'surviving' and 'self-preserving' over the Covid-19 period gave rise to a sense of hope for the lived present. The lockdowns exposed entrenched gendered inequalities as hope was directed in women's lives in caring for children, parents, housework, or students, transforming one form of hope labour into another. Some of our participants demonstrated everyday hope directed into material career aspects. Similarly to studies of hope in conditions of austerity (Coleman, 2017), unequal economic exchanges (Swedberg, 2017), radical precarity in post-socialist societies (Alacovska, 2019) or in conditions of illness (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) survival strategies led some of our participants to adapt their academic skills and seek new alternative, non-academic career paths at present. Finally, acts of self-preservation, through which our participants reassembled themselves, allowed for the emergence of a more expansive and inclusive present, prompting consideration for private lives, previously postponed and concealed by the future-forward looking orientation of hope labour.

Implications for contingent academic careers

The responses of disaffection and temporal disorientation of contingent academics to the disruption brought about by the Covid-19 event highlight the potential for challenging the established status quo, the neoliberal academia. A key finding of our study is showing how the Covid-19 event brought to the fore 'the void'; the experiences of contingent academics, who have no interest in maintaining the status quo. The inability and disillusionment of contingent

academics to take interest in the demands of hope labour during the Covid-19 event called into question normative beliefs and inequalities. The heavy reliance on contingent academics during the Covid-19 period of increased workloads and online teaching recast them as 'essential workers', making it painfully obvious that the most essential workers are often those paid the least (Bloch, 2020). At the same time, collective concerns eclipsed neoliberal ones, and, as our findings show, practices of support and solidarity emerged, reflecting principles for organising the economy in a way that works for people. The shifting subjectivities revealed in our study highlight the accelerated failure of the dominant, neoliberal mode of organising our institutions, scholarship and education, a system in urgent need of revaluation.

Yet, we believe that negative feelings and experiences are not a straightforward path on which to locate a counter-politics or build a revolt. As Badiou (2005) emphasises, all situations are inherently well-structured, well-ordered and infinite, making radical change profoundly difficult. An infinite situation has the capacity to absorb new material, often maintaining the status quo despite the introduction of transformative elements. Negative experiences have always remained largely secret and silenced in the public spaces of academia (Gills, 2010). This silencing continues (Szkudlarek & Alvesson, 2023), even post-Covid-19, despite mounting pressures on contingent academics (Cornilius-Bell & Bell, 2021) and is reflective of a broader tendency in public life of keeping bad feelings and struggles private, confined in intimate conversations between friends (Veldstra, 2020). This inertia must also be understood within the context of asymmetrical power relations and political decisions made both within and outside the neoliberal university (Kitchener, 2024). Within the university, the meetings and corridors present a complicated space for precarious academics, where allowing some to perish is an acceptable outcome from an institutional perspective (Burton & Bowman, 2022). Institutional actors such as vice chancellors, alongside broader government policies, including the implementation of student fees and the widespread adoption of zero-hours

contracts, have actively shaped the precarious conditions under which contingent academics labour.

However, there is no overwhelming consensus which sees the present regime as inherently unjust (Raaper & Olsen, 2016). Whilst existing research has done much to critique the neoliberal university and disrupt the silence, less attention has been given to the development of an alternative policy agenda (Vincent, Lopes, Meliou & Ozbilgin, 2024; Kostera, 2024). Our study registers the failing promise of the neoliberal academic career and joins others in calling for a change in the organisation of our institutions, scholarship and education towards a more equal and democratic system.

Conclusion and research avenues

Drawing on Badiou (2005, 2006, 2009) and engaging with the experiences and responses of contingent academics to the normative belief of hope labour during the elusive present of the Covid-19 event, we reveal how shifted subjectivities of disaffection and temporal disorientation of hope set into question the neoliberal assumptions that sustain and normalise hope labour. While our study contributes significantly to the research on hope labour, it has limitations that open further research avenues.

Importantly, we acknowledge that our sample consists primarily, but not solely, of women academics in the field of business, humanities and social sciences. Future research should explore how the Covid-19 event has affected the lives and careers of academics in other disciplines, as well as professionals in different industries navigating uncertain and precarious work environments (Meliou, Vassilopoulou & Ozbilgin, 2024). Relatedly, the longer-term impact of the Covid-19 event on contingent academic careers requires further investigation to shed light on whether the pandemic marked a turning point or merely a temporary disruption in hope labour. Given that the event is manifested locally, future research should explore this question in different socio-political and cultural conditions. The shifted subjectivities observed

in our study are indicative of the possibilities that a Badiouian analysis may generate. Future research on hope labour could explore the ethical and political implications for more egalitarian and inclusive workplace practices.

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