

## Academia in the time of Covid-19: Our chance to develop an ethics of care

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Covid-19 is having dramatic consequences for millions of people's work-life balance, and academics are no exception. These are transformative times for everyone, and we do not say this glibly. We are living through a global pandemic of unprecedented scope, scale and impact. Unprecedented is the speed at which it has travelled across the globe, the number of people affected and the anticipated long-term consequences on work, life, social relations, the economy and the environment. No industry, or economic sector will go unscathed, and each of us will need to learn new ways to operate, function, and communicate.

We are not artists, singers, poets, or youtubers, and thus have little entertainment value to offer to ease the burden of the lockdown we are living. However, in writing this opinion article we hope to encourage thinking about how **academics may transform our work ethos now and in the future**. This disruptive time can become an opportunity to foster a culture of care, refocus on what is most important, change expectations about the meaning of quality teaching and research, and in doing so make academic practice more respectful and sustainable.

Below we develop this argument aware of our privileged life and job. We are in good health and our families are well. We are confined with our children in the flats of densely populated Barcelona. Although we do not have a garden, we have windows and balconies from which we can breathe cleaner air and admire the emptiness and quietness of our streets. We can fairly assume that our jobs are not at stake, while, in contrast, many friends and relatives have either lost their jobs (temporarily or not) or are struggling to keep afloat. Furthermore, our role as academics provides us with the chance to reflect on what the Covid-19 crisis means for us and how it could affect academia more generally.

### Embrace an ethics of care

The pandemic has arrived amidst a growing call for engaged scholars to resist the neoliberalization of universities and advocating for a "feminist" academia.<sup>1-3</sup> We have been persuaded by the argument that academic praxis should value wellbeing and care over performance and productivity together with solidarity and pluralism over individualism and imposed norms and practices. Our passion as scientists and teachers often make us ignore the high costs of pursuing "excellence",<sup>4</sup> or at least the excellence defined by our evaluators and funders.

Our confinement has led us to think about our **ethics of care**. This crisis has made it clear that we must deepen our care for others, becoming more attentive to the emotions and life experiences of our students, PhD candidates, co-authors, and colleagues. Everyone is feeling great uncertainty, and they may be sick or have a relative infected by Covid-19 or loved ones who have passed away. Now more than ever, we need to be understanding with our colleagues and flexible with our professional commitments.

Therefore, some of us are already setting on-line group-based or supervision meetings while confinement lasts, to design the best strategies to ensure a healthy and effective work-life balance. These digital encounters may be used to modify our research and writing projects accordingly, but this should not be their main priority. In our view, it is not the time for a productivity-focused discourse. For those without children or relatives to care for, confinement may be an opportunity to focus with fewer distractions. However, to assume that the latter is the case for most people would be contrary to the ethics of care that we need.

We see inherent **inequities in confinement**. It would be wrong to assume that all researchers have a suitable and supportive home-working environment. For example, students and PhD candidates often live in small or shared houses and may need to re-define schedules and work-spaces. How can we expect quality reflection or analysis from a student or junior scholar who is confined in a single bedroom? And what can we expect from students who are currently losing their jobs and finding themselves in precarious financial conditions?

Even senior researchers are juggling. How can those with young children be expected to teach online, write creatively, supervise and continue to perform administrative tasks while homeschooling and performing all other household chores? Even if the household conditions were more “favorable”, could someone be expected to conduct business-as-usual in the wake of a global pandemic and maintain the same pace of productivity and engagement with our job duties? We think this may be difficult, if not impossible, and it may be counter-productive to maintain these expectations.

### **Prioritize importance over urgency**

Confinement can thus help us to re-organize our priorities. It is a time to focus on what matters most to us, given the limited high-quality time that may be available. We can use confinement time to make progress on the one or two projects we care most about or to reflect about what our core contribution might be in a post-Covid world to our field and to society. In this regard, we welcome ongoing efforts to **slow down the pace of academia**. Some journal boards, such as Antipode’s or IJURR, have stopped processing and peer-reviewing new article submissions, and some universities have extended tenure calls or staff evaluation. Many funders have extended open research calls and principal investigators have canceled or postponed meetings until further notice.

Aligned with those kinds of decisions, we advocate for focusing on the important over the urgent, which in turn involves **prioritizing collective rather than individual goals**, whilst remaining accountable to our universities and scientifically responsive. This means devoting energy to the key tasks that lie at the ethos of academic work, namely, teaching, mentoring and supporting students; redesigning research objectives with our teams and project partners in ways that do not result in more stress and which may be equally or more rewarding, and contributing to institutional initiatives aimed at fostering collegiality and collective support. In this regard, we can reach out to our “forgotten” colleagues, administrative staff to ask them how they feel; we can leave brief WhatsApps or Telegram audio messages to our closest colleagues. It is also the time to have virtual coffee breaks with our professional communities to create a stronger sense of institutional and emotional belonging. It is also time to recognize that online and virtual meetings have to be properly scheduled, managed, and numbered to not create new burdens on others. From an intellectual standpoint, when and if mental and physical space allows, we can contribute to **public debates about Covid-19 from our own disciplinary perspective**. Such contributions may not necessarily take the form of academic articles but be made through our **teaching or public outreach** (e.g. blogs, TV and radio appearances, student-led debates, etc.).

We have not chosen confinement, but we can choose how to adapt and respond. Inevitably, there will be items on our to-do list that will not get done. **We should not feel guilty about this**. Some projects may involve a time investment that we currently do not have, or they may potentially have unbearable consequences for others. For example, it may not make sense to hold online meetings to start up *new* research or departmental initiatives, involving other people and institutions as if things were operating normally. This may be unnecessarily stressful, since we cannot know a priori if some of the invitees may face difficult circumstances as a result of Covid-19 but may not feel empowered to disclose such circumstances.

These reflections about what should be considered important, and what should be advanced further or put on hold during confinement, also involve becoming aware of power relations in academia. Academics who hold more power than others, and regardless of whether such power emanates from their institutional or relational positions, should make a careful “use” of it. For example, senior academics should ensure that any suggestion of improvement made to students, members of their research groups, or fellow colleagues is taken as constructively as possible, whilst being open to suggestions on how to better support tasks and collegiality. It is unlikely that uneven power relations in academia will change substantially during the pandemic, but it is essential that we remain aware of **how this power is wielded and that its misuse may be more damaging** and more reprehensible than ever before, given the increased fragility and uncertainty that surrounds us.

The leadership and institutional context in which we work can make a huge difference in facilitating the work culture that we will need during confinement and in a post-Covid-19 world. We work at different universities and are supported by different funders, allowing us to contrast how these different institutions are confronting the crisis. **Career and evaluation expectations must change.** Covid-19 can and should lead us to prioritize those areas and tasks where we can really make a difference, which may involve writing less but better, and engaging more seriously with knowledge transfer and policy change activities.

### **Weight the role and values of online teaching**

Many academics have been asked to adjust to online teaching in a matter of days. Based on what we have seen here in Spain, this is being done rather satisfactorily, with students being grateful, responsive and participatory. We are aware that online education is a mainstream practice in open universities which can result in very positive, knowledge-sharing experiences. However, we hope that the “discovery” of online teaching by mainstream universities as a result of the pandemic **does not become an excuse to eliminate long-term teaching positions** and to replace classroom teachers with virtual teaching tools for hundreds of students.

Furthermore, in this rush towards online teaching, we should not forget that, as highlighted earlier, students also have families and friends who may be falling sick or struggling with their jobs and lives. It is thus important to make sure that participants in online classes have the chance to express their thoughts about the crisis and urge those who are struggling to contact their lecturers in private in order to find more flexible ways to learn and engage with the syllabus. It may also be useful to make our teaching content relevant to the current crisis, and to ask students reflect on existing connections between Covid-19 and the studied issue at hand, as some researchers have already done in blogs and other media outlets.<sup>5,6</sup> We also need to ensure we reach out to students who do not have stable internet connections at home for logistical or financial reasons. **One of the most acute risks of online teaching would be to deepen inequities in educational opportunities and social inequalities more broadly.**

### **Adjust research goals**

Our research practice will also need adjustment. By not being able to conduct fieldwork or access labs, **we may need to re-schedule activities under a great degree of uncertainty.** In our case, we supervise research projects where most data collection takes place in countries where the impact of the virus on the population and the social and political responses to Covid-19 are still unknown. We cannot thus yet envision when we will be able to start or continue with data collection, which in turn might have, say, an impact on the development of PhD dissertations and the research collaborations in place. In some projects, such uncertainty could be turned into an opportunity to **re-think the research goals** and turn to secondary data collection and analysis strategies or to identifying unexploited primary datasets that can be shared between colleagues to help Masters or PhD

students. Though this is far from being a best scenario, it is one that might be worth exploring and which may also result in novel knowledge.

We know of course that re-adjusting research questions and methodological focus is probably not the most challenging issue we face. From a human perspective, the key is and will be to encourage a collective movement that persuades funders about the need to be flexible with project completion windows and budgetary justifications. For example, if data collection has been or will be delayed as a result of Covid-19, we cannot ask our research teams to deliver outputs faster in the future; **we should avoid inflicting psychological harm and stress to ourselves and our research teams** when catching up with pending work after confinement ends.<sup>7</sup>

### **Rethink academia after Covid-19**

To conclude, this ongoing global pandemic has reminded us of the often-forgotten co-evolution of humans and (the rest of) nature, and the harm that the latter can also inflict on us, beyond the more common geographically or temporarily circumscribed health crises and the recurrent extreme climatic events that also kill thousands of lives every year. Everyone will be affected by Covid-19 in a rather short period of time, directly or indirectly, and it may change all of us.

Our confinement has led us to reflect on the directions that academic practice could take during this unusual time, so as to avoid embracing the trap of neoliberal scholarship, and how it would be desirable to act after the pandemic. We may like to shift expectations about our work, the way we communicate with each other, and re-think what it means to be an engaged scholar, including the social-psychological, political, and environmental implications of academic activities and our value systems. When the Covid-19 crisis fades away, which it will, we have a chance to make academia a more ethical, empathetic, and thus rewarding profession.

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If you wish to add your name as additional signatory, and expand the views and ideas expressed in the article, please do so [here](#). With your name and contributions, we may work towards a **Global Manifesto on Academic Praxis during and after Covid-19**.

### **Disclaimer**

The views expressed above are the authors' own, who are grateful to Ana Cañizares for insightful edits. Photo: An empty street in Barcelona, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020, by Esteve Corbera.

This opinion article is also available through the following websites:

<http://estvecorbera.com/academia-in-the-time-of-covid-19-our-chance-to-develop-an-ethics-of-care/>

<http://www.laseg.cat/en/news/22/academia-in-the-time-of-covid-19-our-chance-to-develop-an-ethics-of-care>

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