

# Exploring caring collaborations in academia through feminist reflexive dialogues

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## Abstract

This study challenges the prevailing collaboration norms within academia, which predominantly adhere to meritocratic principles favoring masculine and individualistic values. These principles often result in a productivity paradigm centered on publications and high research performance. We contend that such collaboration norms perpetuate exclusionary practices, limiting the participation of women and individuals who do not neatly conform to the criteria of high productivity. Drawing inspiration from Long and colleagues' work in 2020, and guided by relational care ethics, we developed the notion that collaboration as a feminist strategy represents a transformative process of reflexive becoming and co-learning, emphasizing connectedness and generativity through care. Our findings highlight that through the lens of care, we transcended differing viewpoints, transitioning from self-centeredness to an other-oriented approach characterized by empathy, mutual understanding, and acceptance. Emotions emerged as embodied forms of knowledge, enriching the process of co-learning and co-becoming. Based on this, we propose a new constellation of *Feminist Caring Collaboration* in the academy, emphasizing the inclusivity of diverse participants and their varied skills and

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competencies, with full consideration of individuals' needs and future growth opportunities. Furthermore, we advocate for a broader acknowledgment of emotions such as satisfaction, joy, friendship, and pleasure in the knowledge production process, recognizing their significance in individuals' fulfillment in work and various life circumstances.

#### KEYWORDS

academic collaboration, feminist ethics of care, reflexive dialogues, women academics

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This work aims to contribute to existing literature exploring feminist collaborations (e.g., Abel et al., 1983; Kamaara, Karanja, Vasko, and Viau, 2012; Long et al., 2020; Pratt, 2010) as a strategy for making changes to counter the gender inequality in academia. Through conducting a critical, reflexive inquiry into the constellation of academic collaborations, inspired by the feminist ethics of care, we produce critical insights and arrive at alternative solutions that counteract the current constellation of academic collaboration that promotes individualist triumph but thwarts caring, collective progress. We emphasize that cultivating connections and collaborations with other individuals should not be a means to an end, but rather is merely an extension of our pre-existing ties in society reinforcing our place within it via the lens of care ethics. With our text, we demonstrate a strategy for investigating embodied living experiences and the practice of reflexive, collaborative dialogues that aim to show the complexity, inconsistencies, and intersubjective character of continuous interpretations of those experiences. As our relationships with others significantly shape our identity, academic collaborations, therefore, transcend being mere means for success; they form the bedrock of who we are and how we navigate our professional lives. Exploring and writing about women's experiences becomes a potent measure to subvert established hierarchies and modes of knowledge production. In doing so, we contemplate the kind of knowledge and insights this approach might offer—a deeper understanding of alternative research methods that contribute to diversity and inclusion in the prevailing highly instrumentalized and gendered meritocratic system.

Our results show that by practicing care in reflexive dialogues, and incorporating care into responses to others' utterances (Helin, 2019) in a collaborative writing project, we attentively foster a deeper understanding and acceptance of diverse perspectives and varied trajectories in academic career progression. We scrutinize the excessive emphasis on individual excellence prevalent in academic collaboration, exploring acts of resistance and potential shifts. Drawing on our embodied experiences as a group of female academics from various business schools, we shed light on alternative practices that, if acknowledged by the system, could start to rebalance the scales. Crucially, we move forward to consider the experiences of those academics and groups who have welcomed us into genuine collaborations that resulted in friendship, joy, satisfaction, and pleasure. These collaborations involve us as people rather than simply as human resources to be exploited for academic publication and the winning of grants. Capturing the transformational moments from a self-centered career path to other-oriented reflexivity based on care, we propose a new form of *Feminist Caring Collaboration* and call for the genuine amalgamation of such caring collaborations into the reward systems of the academy itself, so that academics are rewarded for acting in an ethical relationship with each other, rather than for publications and grants success in and of themselves. We suggest that the academic world ought to be a place that actively promotes, nurtures, and rewards caring knowledge and practices (habits) (Hamington, 2004). As Liedtka (1996) once argued, the inclusion of

a Feminist Ethic of Care might contribute to enhancing both the effectiveness and the moral quality of institutions impacting individuals' lives. In establishing and fostering collective achievement and making collaborative contributions a key criterion for reward, we can begin to enact a *politics of care* (Segal, 2017). This should not be another hurdle to overcome; instead, it should replace some of the individualistic metrics by which we are currently evaluated. One's ability to relate to others, be attentive to their needs and vulnerabilities, empathize and foster their future growth on their terms should constitute a crucial aspect of the assessment of academic performance at all levels. In this work, the focus is on promoting a relational, embodied view, indicating that “feeling with”—accepting the other—is more important than projecting one's view onto the other (e.g., Hamington, 2004; Kittay & Meyers, 1987; Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 2013), which is the basis for relations. In addition, the findings of this study indicate that a Feminist Caring Collaboration brings forth values and sentiments emphasizing satisfaction, joy, pleasure, and friendship as refreshing elements in academic collaborations. These values and sentiments subvert the tenacity of collaborative constellations rooted in quantifiable productivity and the exclusionary, individualistic culture.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 | The meritocratic academy, individualism, inequality, and collaboration

For decades, the notion of meritocracy of talent solely based on individual merit and excellence has gained a prominent space in institutions and enterprises. The system of meritocracy is supposed to provide everyone—“regardless of gender, race and class—with equal opportunity to advance and obtain rewards on the basis of individual merits and efforts” (Nielsen, 2016, p. 2; Scully, 1997; Young, 1958). It operates on the premise that “success comes to those whose energies and abilities deserve it” (Mann, 1970, p. 427). Indeed, meritocracy forms the basis for Higher Education institutions across the world. The idea of the meritocracy has been and is continuously being used as the key principle “structuring many aspects of university life – from the admission and evaluation of students to the employment and promotion of staff” (e.g., Nielsen, 2016, p. 2; Young, 1958). The myth of meritocracy in academia projects an image of the academic world as neutral and equal, where achievement and individual success are merely based on individual performance and excellence. As we know, this image is far from problem-free. Steinþórsdóttir et al. (2017) reveal gender inequality behind the academic excellence. They contend that, while academic institutions are progressively managed with a strong emphasis on scientific productivity, structural gender inequality within academic institutions remains as financial and managerial resources are found more favorable for research and teaching in male-dominated fields. This affects women and men working in academia.

Research indicates salient evidence that women are greatly marginalized in the current meritocratic system in academia which focuses primarily on individual performances in research, funding obtainment, and publications (Knight & Richards, 2003; Marini & Meschitti, 2018). The current practices of academic meritocracy reflect and reproduce the discursive practices of masculinity and have an effect on disadvantaged women in the competition for scarce rewards in the workplace (Knight & Richards, 2003). For example, career interruption due to reasons such as pregnancy, maternity leave will affect the assessment of individuals' productivity, competitiveness, and academic potential (Knights & Richards, 2003). This becomes particularly pronounced within a meritocracy system that makes emphasis on efforts and success in obtaining research funding, in publications in highly ranked academic journals, and in continuous research activities.

Furthermore, promoting individualistic development is often at the expense of collective growth and collaborations that yield collective benefit (Knight & Richards, 2003). In the academy, men typically take advantage of the peer group of other men, “those at the top of the scientific profession” (Rossiter, 1993, p. 337), who are powerful, prestigious, and influential in controlling funding distribution and managerial resources (Davis et al., 2020). Thus, gendered collaborative culture, as such, increases the risks of sustaining a structural and

procedural arrangement of gender disadvantage of women in academic careers (e.g., Benschop & Brouns, 2003, p. 206). Moreover, Steinórsdóttir and colleagues in their works (2018, 2019) discovered a gendered structural bias lurking beneath the apparent impartiality and objectivity of the academic evaluation system by monitoring the money flow and funding distribution in academic institutions. Given the existing biases against women academics and others who do not neatly conforming to the individualistic values within the system, collaboration emerges as a potential remedy, offering a sanctuary from the competitive and challenging climate. It presents an opportunity for scholars to delve into their research interests within a supportive ambiance, surrounded by thoughtful, caring, and like-minded colleagues or senior professors. In the highly competitive field, especially where outlets for 'feminized' work are limited, collaboration takes on an even greater significance, serving as a crucial mechanism for supporting and safeguarding academics.

On the one hand, individual performances remain the focus and the basis for assessments for career progress; on the other hand, active and effective collaborations in academic work are often seen as necessary for scholars to conduct cross-disciplinary research (and to receive funding for this work) (Treise et al., 2016), and develop research projects and scholarship with various stakeholders (Barbour & James, 2015; Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008). Nonetheless, academic collaborations are emergent and difficult to manage, as they often involve individuals and entities with divergent and strong identities, as well as conflicting interests, at times (Keyton et al., 2008; Long et al., 2020). We argue that overt emphasis on individual performances has minimized academic work that focuses on maximizing opportunities for collaboration and collective growth. Neo-liberal managerial notions combined with intense individualism in the meritocratic system primarily give rise to masculine values. They enhance the risk of marginalizing women (and some men, as well as non-binary people) from collaborative activities in academic work such as researching, funding applications, and co-authorship of article publications.

As van Raan (van Raan, 1998, p.427) suggests, research collaboration has an “impact-strengthening” effect on research. It often implies “a considerable broadening of the audiences around the authors, enhanced by more intensive ‘networking’”. Yet early-career researchers, women in pregnancy or on maternity leave, carers, and those with other external life commitments, are often excluded from ‘collaborative’ activities. This contributes to prolonged periods of non-(or low-) publication and ‘low’ performances for women and early-career researchers (Mairesse & Pezzoni, 2015; Tynan & Garbett, 2007). With a pessimistic tone, Reay (2000), therefore contends that “academia, with its ethos of, at best, mutual instrumentalism, at its worst, individualistic, competitive self-interest and self-promotion, lacks any intrinsic ethic of care” (p. 20).

## 2.2 | Feminist collaboration and care

As stated earlier, collaboration has been regarded as an effective feminist strategy, counteracting the gendered structures, cultures, and processes that persistently marginalize women's participation and limit their potential to thrive in workplaces (Pratt, 2010). Recently, scholars have discussed the benefit and advantages of incorporating feminist values and ethics to challenge and contrast the instrumentalist, competition-based approaches that dominate in academic collaborations (Jones et al., 2019, p. 2; Kamaara et al., 2012; Long et al., 2020; Mountz et al., 2003). Practices such as encouraging retrospective reflexive conversations (e.g., Thomas et al., 2009), equitable participation, recognition of diverse contributions, and applying even power distributions in projects—for example, enabling equal platforms for voices (Mountz et al., 2003), have been suggested as “good collaborations” that enable equal platforms for voices and extend the circle of researchers to “broaden the perspectives and add voices to the field” (Hafernik et al., 1997, p. 31). Building on this, Long et al. (2020) promote activities concentrating on *reflexive becoming* (referring to how “feminist collaborators constantly make sense of what counts as feminist as the group and context evolve”) (2020, p. 457), *proactive improvisation* (referring to how “collaborators collectively strive for everyday transformations within situated constraints”) (2020, p. 457), and *co-learning partnerships* (referring to how collaborators “relate to one another in ways that uphold commitments to reflexivity, equity and

care as practical indications”) (2020, p. 457). Inspired by, and in light of this, we aim to further explore feminist reflexivity in academic collaboration by drawing on a feminist ethic of care and focusing on inclusive, dialogical practices.

We ponder on the ways this shortfall has affected us personally as well as on how we and our co-workers have tried to address it through building supportive and helpful working relationships. While our article focuses on advocating for a cooperative coping mechanism, with the expectation of increased institutional support, it is crucial to emphasize that this effort does not diminish the imperative of challenging the managerial academy as a whole. Therefore, we incorporate feminist ethics of care to confront the management mindset that pervades performance-based practices in academic collaboration. Additionally, we see feminist ethics of care as the methodological and practical touchstone, seeking to shed light on novel academic collaborations based on care as an intervention for the systemic exclusion of women and other marginalized groups.

The core values embedded in meritocracy build upon rationalist logic, seeing the person as an autonomous, self-interested agent rather than as relational and interdependent. Individualism is, therefore, a natural outcome of such values, taking what separates people “prior to what connects us” epistemologically and morally (Held, 2006; Sandel, 1982, p. 133). To build relations with others, in an individualistic society, is for the purpose of pragmatically achieving personal goals. However, “moralities built on the image of the independent, autonomous, rational individual largely overlook the reality of human dependence and the morality for which it calls” (Held, 2006, p. 10). Care ethics conceptualize mutual interdependence and cooperative relations as ontologically basic and sees morality as primarily a matter of responsibilities arising out of attachment to others, moving away from a deductive, calculative approach to moral decision-making (Kittay & Meyers, 1987). Therefore, to care for others is not to impose solutions for problem-solving purposes; instead, “to care means to respect the other’s autonomy and to work to enhance the cared-for’s ability to make their own choices well” (Liedtka, 1996, 184). An ethic of care thus enhances relationality and interpersonal connectedness, as it does not aim to promote dependence on others due to power structures, but focuses on a mutual understanding and the acceptance of others’ freedom of choice and action, as well as addresses human experiences that have been left out by classic political and moral theories (e.g., Engster, 2019).

Based on the ontological foundation of care ethics, which views people as morally and epistemologically relational and interdependent (Held, 2006), we intend to highlight that all academic work—including teaching, researching, and networking within the community and with the public more broadly—is fundamentally relational and interdependent. Moreover, we highlight that care is an approach to morality that is basic to human corporeal experience. We value the embodied knowledge acquired through the body’s transaction with its environment and peers. For example, expressions of vulnerability can be seen as enabling caring imagination, transcending our ability to understand others through emotive resources such as empathy and compassion (e.g., Johansson & Wickström, 2023). The caring imagination, facilitated by emotive resources, goes beyond our physical limitations and extrapolate our caring knowledge to others, even to relatively unknown others (Hamington, 2004). Caring habits, built on this foundation, can be nurtured through practice, remaining open-ended and constantly transacting with new situations in the environment (Hamington, 2004, p. 3–5).

Feminist care ethics now occupies a central position within moral philosophy and feminist theory. As Held (2006) argued, feminist care ethics often examines social and political arrangements in the light of moral values and associated caring relations, offering suggestions for radical transformations of society. It places “a new emphasis” (Koggel & Orme, 2010, p. 110) on context, relationships, interdependence, emotions, and a commitment to social justice (Hankivsky, 2014). Theories of care ethics have evolved from the inspiration of Carol Gilligan’s (1982) work, which analyzed the ethics of care in stereotypical women’s behaviors and the morality attached to these behaviors, including mothering, childrearing, and nurturing activities (e.g., Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013). Tronto (1993) has, later, given the concept political and moral significance, suggesting recognizing our being as vulnerable, mutually interdependent, and typically interconnected in unequal relations in a complex “life-sustaining web” (Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993, p. 103). Drawing on these notions, we carry out a critical, reflexive

scrutiny of the constellation of academic collaborations. While aiming to render critical insights, we, too, intend to arrive at alternative solutions counteracting the existing constellation of the academic collaboration that give rise to individualist triumph but undermine caring, collective progress. Through the lens of care ethics, we highlight that building relations with others should not be a means to an end, but is simply an extension of our pre-existing connections in society and affirms our role within it. Collaborations, therefore, are not merely an instrumental approach to success but the foundation for our being and working life, as our relations with others are “part of what constitutes our identity” (Held, 2006, 14).

### 3 | METHOD

#### 3.1 | Incorporating care in a reflexive, collaborative dialogue

We approach this work by engaging in a reflexive, collaborative dialogue to gain insights into our experiences through collective critical reflection, and to generate new ideals about feminism and feminist practices (e.g., Ahmed, 2017). Thus, the four authors of different cultural, institutional backgrounds, age, and academic ranks, intentionally engage with feminist notions of care in the reflexive, collaborative dialogues, aiming to render critiques upon the excluding power of the traditional constellation of academic collaboration, and to explore an alternative collaborative, inclusive measure for counteracting it.

A reflexive dialogue is a crucial stage in the learning processes (Spellmeyer, 1993) where people can reflect critically on the discourses they belong to or are being constrained by (Harris, 1989; Thomas et al., 2009), thereby to gain understanding about circumstances and to make changes. As researchers, our identities, and the institutional environments we are embedded in, influence not only the research engagement but our views on social reality (Thomas et al., 2009). To value the distinctive, personal experience is central to feminist theory building (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2000). By practicing care in reflexive dialogues concerning our different experiences in daily work, we aim to understand “everything we do to continue, maintain, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible” (Tronto, 2015, p. 265). While seeking to uncover tensions and challenges embedded in contextual factors and our own practices, we create a narrative interested in care where we explore how self-oriented experiences may be linked to other-oriented reflections.

For this work, reflexivity takes a central position as it is an essential element in learning. We rely on the notion of reflexivity to encourage a way of knowing “deeper than reason” and multiplicity of writing (Spellmeyer, 1993, p. 279; Pullen, 2006; Thomas et al., 2009). Furthermore, Helin (2019) highlights writing as a performative utterance through its dialogical formation. In dialogues, the need for responsiveness engenders new meanings in our responding utterances. Thus, responding is an active process in which we build on others' articulations of meanings in each dialogic interplay (Helin, 2019, p. 4). In the same work, Helin, quoting Bakhtin (1986), suggests that the responding comments to an utterance are not “indifferent to one another and are not self-sufficient” (p. 91). Thus, a dialogue with reflexive responses is an open-ended process that continuously brings the meaning creation forward.

Reflexivity embodies experiential pluralism and creates more resources to enrich life worlds (Spellmeyer, 1993, p. 279 in Qualley & Chiseri-Strater, 1994). With our theoretical anchoring in feminist care ethics, reflexivity with care is thus central to the methodological approach (Burkitt, 2012). By gazing into the deep level of our life worlds, evoking dialectical tension and understanding the causes of our struggles, and by engaging with the experiences of others, we reflect upon and offer critiques toward the current constraints and aim to transcend the limits of knowledge about daily practices in academia to build strategies for negotiating differences to determine what we will do and who we will become (e.g., Dempsey & Barge, 2014; Spellmeyer, 1993) through engaging with feminist care ethics. While acknowledging the structural issues that persist, we explore, through the lens of feminist care ethics, how our reflexive, collaborative activities in daily work may be enacted as micro resistances against dominant discourses.

To elaborate, in our reflexive, collaborative dialogues, we make attempts to 'insert' care between each utterance by intentionally introducing notions such as 'caring with' and 'thinking with' others, as well as viewing each one of us as attached to others in the process of making changes collectively (e.g., Tronto, 1993, 2013). We then capture the intersection between responses and the utterances of others to explore how care serves as an engine for interest and attentiveness to others' (unfamiliar) experiences. We see this as an experiment for creating performative reflexive dialogues through care. We then, through writing up the practices of dialogues, weave the caring signs shown in the progressing utterances as permanent traces in a fabric (Derrida, 1997 in Helin, 2019). Following this, we further suggest that better supporting and rewarding of such activities could be of help to challenge the meritocratic status quo in academia.

### 3.2 | The reflexive collaboration

Through dialogic tales that are co-authored, a feminist collaborative perspective demonstrates the importance of women's experiences as knowledge and seeks to recognize various points of view. We have chosen to establish a collaborative space for further investigation of our individual experiences in accordance with this tenet. This approach has been used in previous studies to explore personal experiences, cultural phenomena, and social issues. These studies have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of social dynamics and power structures and have given insightful information about the difficulties those who are marginalized encounter (e.g., Ahonen et al., 2020; Lund & Tienari, 2019; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). We thus conducted an experimental reflexive collaboration of four female researchers of different institutional ranks, age, and ethnic backgrounds from different universities in the UK and Sweden. Three of us are based in Sweden, and one is in the UK, with ages varying from the twenties to the sixties. While two researchers, in their late forties and early sixties, both have grown children who have moved out of the family home, one other researcher in her early fifties has two younger children aged 6 and 11. The youngest is in her late twenties and is single, working at a university in the UK. Two researchers are native Swedish, whereas the other two are both migrants from Asia. While the three Swedish researchers were acquainted through their respective workplaces, the researcher from the UK knew less about the other members of the team while the research team was formed. The dialogues took place over the course of multiple Zoom meetings and emails that lasted for around 6 months.

After that, the researcher from the UK visited Sweden, which enabled us to facilitate another week of discussions in person. In our dialogues, we shared personal experiences and related these experiences to structural issues and *negotiated with each other to theorize* possibilities for hope and repair concerning feminist care ethics. Instead of allowing individual experiences to stand alone, the responsive nature of the utterances carried forward the dialogues into an evolving process where we reflected upon our own experiences in academic collaborations, offering comments and critiques regarding dominant concepts, and their impact on equality and intersectional issues between gender, age, and personal life situations.

The exchange of emails typically took place subsequent to a Zoom meeting when the authors aimed to provide more detailed explanations related to the topics discussed during the online meeting. Occasionally, the email exchange included an entire written piece as an attachment, addressing one or more of the themes discussed during the Zoom meeting. Reading and processing these email exchanges served as an extension of our dialogues during the Zoom meetings, playing a crucial role in understanding, appreciating and accepting different points of view. The first author organized all dialogue materials, including grouping relevant content from email exchanges into thematic categories. For the analysis section, we utilized excerpts directly from the Zoom meetings and those that combine content from both the dialogues and the expanded elaborations found in the email exchanges.

Furthermore, the project began in the ending phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of physical, face-to-face contact has been integrated into our 'normal' daily routine. Nonetheless, the email exchanges, Zoom meetings, and the subsequent physical face-to-face meetings have been perceived by all of us not only as methods through

which we generated content for the experimental experience but also as ways to enhance our mutual understanding of each other. Various forms of interaction have strengthened the trusting and caring relationship among us.

We posit that our dialogical process, shaped by the unique circumstances of each researcher and guided by feminist ethics theory, along with self- and other-oriented reflexivity, encompasses a blend of elements: the knowledge producers and the outcomes of the knowledge production process. Our reflexive collaboration, portrayed through dialogic tales, distinguishes itself from the prevalent self-indulgence often associated with self-reflexivity. The reflexivity grounded in relational care transcends individual introspection, evolving through active engagement with others and their experiences. This form of reflexivity extends beyond mere post-hoc reflection on the research act. Engaging in reflexive collaboration with care, therefore, represents an approach to ensure the recognition, acknowledgment, and accommodation of individual needs and differences. In this way, the reflexive dialogues we experienced went beyond mere self-reference; instead, they were a process of co-becoming.

### 3.3 | The co-authorship

The first author initiated the collaborative project with the idea of problematizing the narrow meritocratic system and its gendered and marginalizing effect on the collaborative culture. The second author joined the discussion of the theoretical framing process. The two authors then developed the idea on an alternative view on collaborations through feminist care ethics and reviewed the literature on feminist collaboration. The first two authors actively worked together throughout the writing process, producing, reworking and editing the final text of this work. The third and the fourth author participated in the collaboration by joining dialogues and producing reflexive utterances.

Through this writing process, we were able to release—and perhaps free—our embodied voices through the collaborative real-time sharing of the OneDrive folder. This allowed us to discuss a range of topics with one another, including vulnerability, gendered identities, differences, and challenges we faced while juggling our work and personal lives, such as how we collaborate, who we want to collaborate with, how we advance our careers in a way that fosters healthy collaboration, etc. across various career paths. To avoid directly associating the narrative with specific authors, we gave pseudonyms to each person: “Anna”, “Helene”, “Emma” and “Frida”.

## 4 | ANALYSIS

We demonstrate how we engaged in reflexive collaborative dialogues through thinking of care, caring relations, and interpersonal attachment. The narrative we produced contains an evolving pattern in which we *identified* problems through expressing personal struggles and reflections, *relating* those personal experiences to structural and ideological issues, and *negotiating with each other*, to *theorize* possibilities for change in relation to feminist care ethics.

We illustrate the process where we carried out critical rethinking about our conformity and submission to the existing constellation of academic collaboration. We overcome differences, activate co-learning and co-becoming through care, and maintain embodied knowledge about ourselves and others through uttering embodied, corporeal experiences with care. Eventually, we address our desire to establish a new constellation of collaboration by initiating *Feminist Caring Collaboration* and writing up a feminist manifesto for change.

### 4.1 | Overcoming differences—From the focus on self to the understanding of others

While conducting the reflexive dialogues, we intentionally suggested open expressions of ourselves regarding coping strategies in daily work in different institutions and countries. During our exchanges of individual anecdotes,

we encouraged free expressions of our feelings and emotions arising from personal experiences, including joy, excitement, frustrations, and senses of hopelessness and helplessness (Hamington, 2004; Tronto, 1993). Considering that the level of familiarity between us varies at the point of writing this paper, free and open expressions of feeling were not an easy task. We made efforts to overcome the habit of focusing on the output when conversing with new acquaintances; rather, we paid attention to the input we received from others.

Tronto (1993) once eloquently put it: "Caring requires that one start from the standpoint of the one needing care or attention. It requires that we meet the other morally, adopt that person's, or group's, perspective, and look at the world in their terms" (p. 19). Drawing on this, we identified the needs and struggles of *others* in our dialogues, and through responding to the utterances of others, we shift the attention and focus onto these notions (Helin, 2019; Thomas et al., 2009). For us, care was in place when we listened and reflected differently on the anecdote of others and began to generate an understanding and acceptance of the unfamiliar situations and needs of others.

**Anna:** For me, to survive in masculine academia is not only about gender equality but more. Language, culture, and racial backgrounds are all coming into play.

**Frida:** Oh, I understand... I mean, I do not really understand. But I believe the type of difficulties you encounter must have been very different from what I can comprehend.

**Anna:** Yes, many would simply shrug their shoulders when hearing stories like this, thinking this is just another piece of complaint, so I have learned to be silent about it.

**Emma:** No, but this is exactly why we need to talk about it... I also have stories about how people judge me as being a blonde, implying that I made my career because of my look. That hurts.

**Helene:** I see. I guess we all have our different views. Other than being a non-white, I often feel included by faculties and in collaborations. But this is often due to the obvious 'productivity' I have shown. I see how 'being productive' has put immense pressure on people though.

- (excerpts from Zoom meeting recordings)

As such, by constantly referring to and enacting feminist notions of care, we transformed the utterances, and we shifted attention onto the personal experiences of others. We thereby gained a deeper understanding of the struggles and constraints of others. Care and connectedness with others facilitate the utterances, addressing the other-oriented reflections. Although our utterances maintain overtly different views due to distinct differences in age, career path, and institutional contexts, enacting care throughout stimulates a moral impulse from within toward others, their needs, and their goals, which transforms into a sense of moral responsibility when addressing the different stories we tell (Held, 2006; Liedtka, 1996; Noddings, 2013). With this moral intention through care, in our dialogues, differences become an enabling force, moving the dialogues toward a more meaningful direction beyond a surface unity and politeness (e.g., Helin & Jabri, 2016).

In what follows, we describe how we theorize/categorize/provide reflexive accounts and tease out the tensions that underlie our collaborative processes. Moreover, as Helin (2019) indicates, the dimension of the *unfinalizability* (in Helin, 2019) in the ongoing dialogue points to a future direction of development. The presentation of our dialogues does not serve as the summary of the open-ended, ongoing process but it signals the 'multiplicity' of writing as one statement unfolds into further responses (Pullen, 2006, 280; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). We see this prospective aspect of dialogue as a sign of progressing our utterances toward transformed views, and eventually to possible proposals of actions.

## 4.2 | Critiquing the existing definition of academic productivity

The concept of *productivity* frequently occurs when we discussed how we were defined and evaluated in an instrumentalist collaboration in retrospect. We discussed our prior experiences taking part in various

collaborations, where we each had different perspectives on how *productivity* affected our behavior and performance during the collaborative process. Helene embarked on the dialogue by explaining her attempts to succeed in academia as a young female researcher by fitting into a collaborative structure geared toward performance and productivity. She added that established academics at her university who are “impressed” by her productive work ethic and see her as a “star” emerging in the subject group have encouraged her to keep up her productivity.

**Helene:** While doing my Ph.D., I came into contact with a few established academics, both men and women. With some of them, I built up a professional and ongoing personal relationship, and eventually managed to secure a top-tier journal publication. This helped me to nail subsequent tenure-track job searches, and I also got some handy preparation tips and notes from my supervisor, and two other co-authors who are also established academics.

**Frida:** Well, I have a very different experience in this regard. I have been cut off from my supervisor and the institution I belonged to. But I later managed, with persistence, to build my academic portfolio entirely on teaching experiences at the cost of further academic writing and publishing.

**Anna:** Indeed, there are different kinds of collaborations we are involved in due to different experiences. I have mixed feelings about it. I strive for the traditional concept of ‘productivity’ through publishing and active research. But I try to do it based on my interests and passion but not instrumentally. I see many ‘core’ productive groups, in nature, tend to be similar to ‘boys’ clubs, where highly competitive and senior scholars are gathered, and many others, such as early-career researchers, ethnic minorities, and women on pregnancy or maternity leave, who are commonly regarded as unproductive, are often excluded...

**Helene:** ... yes, I agree. It is only occasionally [that] shining junior scholars are deliberately picked up by senior colleagues, at least in the ranking of associate professor or higher, who are usually the leading-in-practice of the group, but for most, they are excluded for other reasons related to competency in the name of ‘fitness’ or ‘excellence’.

**Anna:** Exactly! I think I have been relatively productive these years, judging by the general standard of the number of publications. But I do not like to follow the current rules of ‘productivity’. I prefer to work with people based on similar ideas, approaches, and with the consideration of those who need most to be included in a collaboration.

- (excerpts combined with Zoom meeting recordings and email exchanges)

In these exchanges, through responding to others' utterances, we paid attention to and acknowledged our banding and conformance to the culture of high productivity. Caring about the recollection of the other's experience served as motivation for us to begin to form a deeper understanding of it and articulate practical remedies.

**Anna:** I tried to form a type of collaboration, assimilating my other female colleagues and creating opportunities for Ph.D. candidates, early-career researchers, and newly graduated Ph.D.s looking for permanent positions. I have to admit that I also tend to be lost in our daily emphasis on performance. I have become a bit egocentric, too.

**Emma:** Oh, egocentric! That speaks about the current norm we are embedded in.

**Anna:** Yes! I thought others were like me, aiming at publishing, researching, and achieving goals (that I set for myself), but hoping for a collective progressive process. When initiating collaboration on co-authorship, I missed considering the needs of others, I have to admit. Some of my colleagues are in the phase of life where they are a mother of two or 3 children. They want to spend more time with their children in the summer rather than writing a paper with me at that time. You see, even if we want to bring along others, we will have to understand what they truly need and want.

**Helene:** I have another understanding of productivity though. Being a non-white foreigner, competing with ‘locals’ is never easy. Productivity in a standard sense in terms of publication and research activities are

among the few explicit accounts that I can build my career upon. In my case, the promotion standards seem to keep changing and moving in a very unspecific way. I am hoping to be recognized for both quantifiable and unquantifiable qualities, [but] only if they are explicitly stated.

**Frida:** And I am hoping we do not only talk about publications but other aspects of working in academia, too, which should be accounted for 'productivity'!

- (excerpts from Zoom meeting recordings)

The above exchanges demonstrate highly divergent views on one of the major subjects defining the constellation of academic collaborations, *productivity*. Tension emerged when we expressed distinctive views. Care came into play here, promoting an atmosphere in which we needed to listen, accept, and understand each person's history, current stance, and future outlook (Hamington, 2004; Tronto, 2013). A connectedness has been created through our reflections upon being collective as women in academia facing similar challenges as a group. Empathy arose along with a moral impulse we generated toward each other. We acknowledged our differences and enacted relatedness and care (with empathy) to understand each other's circumstances based on the concern of others while responding to each other's utterances. This forges performativity (Helin, 2019), materialized in a profound criticism toward the rigid understanding and framing of *productivity* as it pushes many of us to 'willingly' become 'publication machines'.

While being overtly critical regarding *productivity*, we came to an understanding that some of us depend on the quantitative measure of *productivity* (especially those who are minority members) to leverage our ongoing quest for legitimacy and recognition in this field. The experience of being ethnically 'foreign' is an 'unimaginable' experience for some of us. Care and caring intentions are, therefore, crucial in unfamiliar situations for people to act upon differences and establish a possible safe place where no sentiments are rejected or stigmatized. We recognized that reflexive dialogues strengthened relatedness through care and gave rise to moral imaginations through empathy and sympathy for each other (e.g., Hamington, 2004).

### 4.3 | Questioning power relations and mentorship

The existing power dynamics and their relevance in forming collaborations is another topic to which we paid much attention. We began by considering the types of sponsorship/mentoring and gatekeeping practices senior scholars engage in, the significance they attach to senior scholars' support, and how support affects our perceptions of mentorship, relationships, career prospects, and sentiments of precariousness. Such a socio-ontological notion of "precariousness" has been introduced by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), a shared state of bodily vulnerability as well as an entity from which demands for political change can be made. As a result, when we challenge such gatekeeping practices that appear to be widespread in academic instrumental collaborations, and the power dynamics embedded in making such practices consistently ongoing, the awareness of shared precariousness can serve as a starting point for radical progressive politics and serve as the basis for a non-violent ethics built on collaboration and solidarity. The development of sponsorship connections was then thoroughly discussed, along with how it affected our expectations of academic collaborative practices, co-authorship, and career development. Differentiated views and experiences were being expressed.

**Frida:** There has been a 'failed' collaboration in my Ph.D. process. In fact, I was never included in the collaboration, but my data was. Once I realized that my data was exploited without my knowledge by a few senior faculty members, I never responded to the professor's email. I was, however, aware of the importance of co-authoring with seniors in order to get early publications. In that sense, this became an opportunity lost when I did not respond or share more of my data. Not conforming to the conditions [meant] I never got any support for my thesis work from these renowned professors.

**Emma:** I was lucky, I guess. The center I was working at was funded by a few male professors, who were often referred to as the 'funding fathers'. During my career, I have had the great opportunity to work with well-established and recognized male professors. I can honestly say that because of them I have had the chance to do scholarly work that I had not been able to do alone... Without these professors' help, I would never have managed this achievement.

**Anna:** Interesting! The term 'funding father' bothers me a bit though... When I graduated, I was on my own. I did not have any funding 'parents' or backup solutions served for me. Rather, I began to apply for jobs from the day I got my degree... The good outcome of this is that I do not feel like being unfairly treated when I cannot use any connections for career advancement. I believe mentorship in an academic career is important. However, this mentorship may take different forms. Having received help from a few female mentors at the very beginning of my career, I am very grateful for the inclusive type of collaborations that were based on the intention of giving opportunities to the ones who are in need. Now, I conduct collaborations, trying to be inclusive, and supportive, devoting in terms of time and effort as much as I can... Being a non-native Swede, on the other hand, can make me feel like an outsider in Swedish academia at times.

**Emma:** I do agree. It's just that I don't always see a gender dimension being clear in terms of getting support. I got support from male professors. And I also got very mean comments from female peers criticizing, judging my competence.

**Helene:** I see your point there. I also have been included in solid collaborations with male senior faculty members. I realize, though, in general, this selection process is purely based on your previous track record. If we continue to do the same thing, the same system will only become stronger.

**Anna:** I have experienced excluding treatments from female colleagues, too, mostly in teaching activities... A true caring and inclusive culture is needed.

- (excerpts combining Zoom meeting recordings and email exchanges)

The above exchanges vividly illustrate differentiated experiences regarding the power relation we are embedded in among women in academia. Some reflections show gratitude for receiving support and sponsorship from senior male academics, for example, professors in the early career phase; others express disappointment. The reflexive remarks being made here emphasize that the type of repressing forces that women face may not always be the opposite sex. Yet, power dynamics in networks, and the level and nature of the senior scholars' support significantly affect our perceptions of mentorship, relationships, career prospects, and sentiments of precariousness.

We recognized that each person anchored the sense-making process of their experience based on an individualized understanding of the circumstances and situations, as well as on differentiated career stages. While eagerly telling our own stories, a reflection on each other's experiences and an evolving understanding of each other's anecdotes unfolded in our dialogues. Even though we initially encountered distinctive delineation from others, our conversation has occasionally been emotional; the willingness to connect emerged through responsive utterances (Helin, 2019). We, after that, were able to problematize the habitual coping strategies—such as only collaborating with the senior, established, powerful faculty (often male) members in the early career phase—in terms of how they have contributed to strengthening the gender inequality in academia that has limited our independence, freedom, and access to equal opportunities.

#### 4.4 | Understanding the intersection of gender, age, and marital status

As we are in different phases in our academic careers, our discussion inevitably touched upon the intersection of age, gender, and career growth, which are related to the constellation of collaboration. We reflected upon how the principles of the meritocracy system in academia that overtly emphasize productivity, constant research activities,

and continuous publications pose obstacles, particularly for younger and female early-career academics who may wish to start a career and a family at the same time or pursue a career alongside significant caring responsibilities. For instance, a study of gender-neutral tenure-clock-stopping regulations for new parents found that fathers rather than mothers benefited from such policies, which are supposed to encourage women who have greater caring responsibilities than men (Antecol, Kelly, and Jenna, 2018). When we discussed women's 'disadvantages' in academia, maternity was found to be an indispensable topic. It remains a myth that women with young children have been pinpointed as being less devoted to their academic endeavors (e.g., Ginther & Kahn, 2004) in similar situations. Conversely, it has shown that their career progression is unaffected (Heijstra et al., 2015).

The timing of maternal planning seems to be central for women academics. Some of us acknowledged their "privileges" for having either an early or a delayed maternal experience while discussing women's challenges with being divided between household duties and professional performances.

**Emma:** I got the message that I became an associate professor on a Friday afternoon, and this coming Monday, I went to the hospital and gave birth. I got my children late in life, and from a career perspective that was very good. I did not go on maternity leave full-time; I supervised Ph.D. students during both [periods of] leave. I am not sure that I would have managed my career if I had got my family earlier. It was important to have the hard work done during a time when I did not have to take responsibility for others. Today, I also realize that my network was very much established in my early career; I am not sure I [would have] had time for networking with a family waiting at home.

**Anna:** Well, I have to say, I am also 'lucky' (gesturing with quotation marks with both hands), as my son has moved out. Although I am older than my peers and fellow colleagues, at least I can focus on my work now. I can write articles without being constantly disturbed.

- (excerpts from Zoom meeting recordings)

Paradoxically, while feeling the privilege of having a grown-up kid, Anna felt that her age poses a hindrance in many ways in her academic career. The discussion on ambition led to our reflections on how constant comparison and competition have caused a lack of care, even from peers including female colleagues:

**Anna:** I am older than most of my colleagues. I am nearly 50 but still regarded as an early career researcher. When evaluating my advantages and disadvantages compared with younger colleagues, or even with some of you, I have passed the age for maternity challenges.

Aging is one aspect that pushes me to be ambitious in my performance. I use the word 'ambitious', knowing it is a relative term. We seldom or never address this as an influencing factor for forming collaborations. But aging and its impact on women is undeniable, physiologically and psychologically. I have received comments about me being 'too ambitious', with a negative tone, often from female peers. For me, time is a scarce resource, as I am approaching 50.

- (excerpt from Zoom meeting recordings)

In contrast to others who concentrate on managing their married lives, Helene, who remains single, explained the perceived opportunities, difficulties, and dilemmas that she has been experiencing.

**Helene:** I have a different take on the gender script and norms that I have to constantly combat. We all know that heterosexual coupledness remains the expected civil status of adults so, for a very long time, marriage, having children, and buying a house have been culturally portrayed as "settling down" or the anticipated transition upon reaching some certain age/life-course stage. Although apparently against the couple norm, my single status and being childless (despite nevertheless wanting kids) are frequently seen as career advantages. In comparison to those who have younger children, caregiving responsibilities, etc., in the family,

I am mobile, ensuring national mobility, and this has seemed to increase the possibility, even in forming collaborations. However, the relocation, the changing living environments, and the lack of financial and mental support within the household are all accompanied by uneasiness, uncertainty, and occasionally anxiety. I have to work harder, while others may also take advantage of my time and effort at work by thinking I do not have a life.

- (excerpt from email exchanges)

It appears that we are being pressured into an extraordinary level of 'hard-working mode' through a combined force of gender, age, and even marital status. Collaborations built upon instrumentality constantly push women to assess and evaluate the impact of biological factors on career development.

When openly sharing personal and private emotional experiences in concerns about aging, and different perceptions of maternity, bearing in mind relatedness and care, we were able to listen to, understand, and engender empathy toward each other (e.g., Hamington, 2004; Tronto, 1993). We realized that despite the institutional rank, we were unexceptionally being indoctrinated by, or coerced into, conformance with the individualist culture that limited women's opportunities in the academy. Unintentionally, we compared and evaluated the coping strategies and willingly passed on recommendations to other female peers to organize the 'best timing' for maternal plans within the same indoctrination. Upon this recognition, we sensed the urgency of changes. We critically reflected upon the discourses that we situated ourselves in and encouraged each other to rethink the alleged success and failure of any previous collaborations.

We also acknowledged that reflexive dialogues differed from a self-oriented, reflexive linear process. Although tensions arose when varied perceptions of experiences were expressed, we found that we constantly re-evaluated our own assessment of others' situations and choices, drawing on the other-oriented care (e.g., Burkitt, 2012) to ensure that the collaborative reflexive process has generated new possibilities, easing the unexpected differences among us.

While telling overtly distinctive personal stories, a bond was forged between us through constant silent referencing of care, connectedness, and the needs and struggles of others during our dialogues. The intentionally incorporated idea of care facilitated our approaches and acceptance of different views from divergent standpoints. As some of us were only acquainted through the introduction of others, there remained a risk of keeping superficial politeness while conversing with each other. However, instead of striving toward consensus (e.g., Jabri, 2012 in Helin & Jabri, 2016), the attempt to know more about others emerged out of the intention of caring for the needs of others in both familiar and unfamiliar situations.

Moreover, although actively responding to the utterances of others and shifting our attention to addressing the lived experiences of others, we also, in our writing, kept the multiplicities of texts intact (e.g., Pullen, 2006). Here, we present our different viewpoints by demonstrating how we drew on care in response to differentiated experiences; we show how thoughts and reflections have evolved without finalizing statements in a continuing dialogue (e.g., Frank, 2005 in Helin, 2019). Thus, uniformity in terms of change has been achieved while our different stories and experiences are being preserved. Reflexivity, as such, transcended the beholding of surface unity. Each person then built on the notion where the previous one left off and delved into a deeper understanding of each matter arose from the previous person's narrative. This way, the reflexive dialogue formed a continuous pattern, pursuing more profound insights in different utterances.

#### 4.5 | Emotions as the base of co-learning and co-becoming—Embodying a feminist caring collaboration

Care is an approach to morality that is basic to human experience. Embodied and affective knowledge informs care (Hamington, 2004, p. 5); thus, corporeal experiences such as feelings and emotions are central to our reflexive

processes (e.g., Burkitt, 2012). We, therefore, focused on capturing the expressions of emotions and feelings, seeking to understand how we enacted emotive resources to influence our responses to others in the dialogues, and how they further affected or even change our perceptions of others. That is, in this analysis, emotions are not treated as 'personal property', nor do we attempt to contain, rationalize, or refine these expressions. We incorporated the notion that caring about others (the environment and the community) is not to impose any solutions on them but rather respecting their autonomy, needs, and future growth and helping them in making their own choices to thrive (Held, 2006; Liedtka, 1996, p. 184; Noddings, 2013, p. 13).

Care is embodied in our non-judgmental acceptance of expressions of emotions (such as anger, frustration, and disappointment). Upon receiving the emotive signals from others, we reflected upon the discourses that we belonged to and encouraged each other to re-evaluate previous collaborations, and to shape new embodied knowledge about ourselves and others. This endeavor prompted increased self-reflection and co-learning processes, which paved the way to initiatives for future change.

**Emma:** I struggle for recognition and acknowledgment. Having finished my Ph.D., I decided to stay in academia but to be engaged in research projects and processes that span between academia and external actors. This might not have been the best strategic decision to make. But it has been rewarding for me. However, it has always been important for me to be engaged in the organizations where I have been working. But I also see a trend that we become more and more individualistic and more and more elitist based on criteria such as productivity and research outcomes.

**Frida:** I agree. Recognition is crucial. I wish my strengths would be acknowledged as legitimate academic skills. It is frustrating when striving for it though. I survived by using my social capital. I never let a chance go in social interactions. If you do not have social skills and empathy, you will not be able to reach out to the most powerful people. To publish a lot speaks against such activities. It is a successful strategy to concentrate on publishing to reach the level of professor, yet there are other paths. To leverage your social skills is an underestimated road forward. It is necessary to allow and recognize different competencies and roles in the academic career path.

**Anna:** I see what you are trying to say. Although I do not have the skill and resource to leverage high social capital, I can talk about gratefulness in my journey so far. I have always remembered the support I received when I just got my Ph.D. I was included in a research project led by two female colleagues. The two of them (associate professors), together with other colleagues (mainly female and in their early careers), had applied for and successfully retained a large research fund with which they were able to recruit 12 researchers from different disciplines and departments. I was able to work for the first time as an independent researcher, and I was able to prove my capacity by publishing a journal article and a research report on this project. This has boosted my confidence as a researcher and has been meaningful for me in many ways. That was a good collaboration.

- (excerpts combining the Zoom meeting and the email exchange)

In striving for recognition, various expressions of emotional experiences were uttered. The dialogue resulted in an intensified reflexivity characterized by individuals' intent to understand themselves and others through reflecting on previous experiences relating to academic collaborations. Apparently, we remain distinctive from each other in terms of experience, competence, and objectives. But holding the principle of relating to each other's experiences, we did not reject or set aside different voices, but engaged in deeper critical discussions, where we constantly conducted collective reflexivity to interpret and critically understand our differences. We consider this a process of emotional 'reflexive becoming' (e.g., Long et al., 2020) as we take our differences as the critical departure point for an alternative understanding of the conventional constellation of academic collaboration, the gender bias, and our role in sustaining or resisting such constellations.

Apart from vulnerable emotions such as frustration, anguish, and disappointment, empowering emotions such as gratefulness, empathy, and sympathy arise to inform care and embodied knowledge of ourselves and others, strengthening people's attachment to each other in different circumstances. In addition, joy, pleasure, and satisfaction were among the emotions uttered. We see this as an intriguing emerging embodied aspect of care that potentially denotes an approach to “personal and social morality that shifts ethical considerations to context, relationships, and affective knowledge” (Hamington, 2004, p. 3–5).

**Anna:** Honestly, I realized the importance of understanding the needs and different perspectives of others through a few collaborative writing processes. Judging by the outcome, they are successful ones. However, during the process, when I think about them now, I feel that the goal of publishing the piece very much drove me. I could say that I was enlightened by my co-author's joy after one recent publication. This publication was an encouragement for her to reconsider her career after maternity leave. When my co-author expressed her joy over our collaboration and the publication, I began to reflect upon the importance of creating opportunities for people to participate in academic collaborations, not only for the result but also for valuing the meaningfulness and joy in the co-writing process itself.

- (excerpt from Zoom meeting recordings)

Informed by expressions of emotions, we see care as the base for establishing a new collaboration constellation in the academy. That is, we ought to create opportunities to empower others by attending to the development of others' full capacities within the context of their self-defined needs and aspirations (Liedtka, 1996; Tronto, 2013).

Collaboration is a feminist strategy (Pratt, 2010), “it is both a means of situating knowledge and a source of support” (ibid, p. 44). The fact that women utilize various strategies for coping and thriving in a male-dominated environment and constantly reflect upon the connectedness between home, society, and work, as well as on individual achievement, has proven “women's capacity to transform the academy” (e.g., Pratt, 2010, p. 44). In this paper, we intend to reignite the debate about enriching the traditional constellation of academic collaborations—which is centered on instrumentality, productivity, success, and power—with new meanings and components.

We call for collaborations within care and co-learning that actively seek to support each other, especially those who are not in an advantageous condition for active research or publishing, whether of immediate benefit to the Professoriate or not. We label such a constellation as ‘*Feminist Caring Collaboration*’, which is characterized by relationality and inclusivity. We emphasize the inclusion of not only people of various backgrounds, needs, rankings, and phases in their career path, but to embrace diversified competencies, capabilities, and strengths while keeping in mind that care must be acknowledged as such by the care recipient within the framework of feminist ethics of care (e.g., Noddings, 2013). The opportunity to flourish during collaborative activities will be hampered if this is not achieved.

Finally, as feminist organizational researchers, we are well informed of the weight of joy and satisfaction and the value of happiness in working life and the relations connected to it (Streimikiene and Grundey, 2009). However, while much of organizational research aims at finding solutions to enhance joy, satisfaction, and happiness in working life, these factors are often overlooked when accessing working experiences in the academy. Thus, we highlight elements such as pleasure, satisfaction, and joy as essential elements of the Feminist Caring Collaboration just like how Hanson once suggested that “among the greatest pleasures of an academic life...are the collaborations and friendships spawned through ‘learning and producing’ scholarly knowledge” (in Pratt, 2010, p. 44).

## 4.6 | A manifesto for change

When engaged with a collaborative reflexive dialogue and adding feminist values such as relationality and care, our initial concerns with external-oriented reflections on previous negative experiences with the focus on *self* shifted to

a focus on other-oriented reflexivity. This shift was accompanied by a desire to initiate change—not only for women who may symbolize disadvantaged identities as well as individuals who do not always follow performance norms in the academy, but also for the entire community. Our reflexive dialogue also brings insights into how power asymmetry has contributed to forging separation and intensified individualism, and how we anticipate change through care and relationality. To relate to and connect with others through care enabled more profound reflexivity, uncovering the depth and breadth of the impact of meritocratic influences on our working selves and our roles in instrumentally constellated collaborations. Through this, we conclude that empathy, mutual understanding, and acceptance of differences inform us of future actions for change.

Furthermore, the feminist caring reflexive dialogue shows us that relieving constraints is not an individualized responsibility. Solidarity, organizational 'reach' (Liedtka, 1996), and support are indispensable conditions for an inclusive culture that nurtures true collective growth. True collaboration for women is often hindered by an instrumental logic that the individualist culture in academia contributed to consolidate. Caring collaborations prioritize collective progress and an ethical process rather than instant results. However, adding feminist values of care in the establishment of feminist collaborations is not to actively exclude any gender or identities from participating in such a collaborative arrangement. Instead, it encourages inclusion (of different genders), embracement of differences (various career statuses, ethnicity, language skills, etc.), and relatedness to others, especially to those who need support and help for future growth.

Jointly, we come to the conclusion and pledge below:

What we aim for with this work is, while continuously exposing and unraveling the precarious experiences of women through 'complaint' (e.g., Ahmed, 2017), we are determined to find counterweight and solutions to problems. In this work, we openly complained, and made sure our complaints were heard, understood, processed, cared for, and they became the basis for feminist, relational reflexivity by peers. Yet, apart from complaints, we aim to, by identifying and conceptualizing the issues we all experience as academics in different phases in our careers, call for counteractions and changes.

People should not be left out in collaborative processes in academia due to an increasingly individualistic and masculine culture situated in the meritocratic system. A system should not be created to eliminate but to include and embrace. Voicing this critique, we call for more attention to establishing caring relations in this highly competitive, individualist workplace so that all people, regardless of their ethnicity, gender identity, and different phases in career and life that they are in, are able to obtain opportunities to develop and thrive.

Addressing the abovementioned issues that are closely relevant to all four of us and many others of similar backgrounds and conditions, one very salient focus in our dialogue about true caring collaborative activities is the need for deliberately inclusive gestures and actions. Practices that are an invitation to researchers who are often regarded as 'unproductive' and that offer them some small haven from what one prominent academic once told me was the "Lion's mouth".

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This work departs from a critique of seemingly neutral meritocracy systems where individualistic, masculine values prevail, perpetuating an obscured recognition of productivity that persistently reinforces a gendered structure in academic collaborations. To address this issue, we embarked on an exploration of subversive strengths within feminist collaborations by incorporating relational care. Through this endeavor, we contribute to the feminist

perspective on collaboration (e.g., Abel et al., 1983; Kamaara, Karanja, Vasko, and Viau, 2012; Long et al., 2020; Pratt, 2010) by proposing '*Feminist Caring Collaborations*' as a solution to counterbalance the increasingly intensified individualist culture resulting from the conventional norms of collaboration within academia.

We build on Long and colleague's (2020) work in which they suggest feminist collaboration is a process of reflexive becoming and co-learning, and it is proactive and generative (e.g., Tronto, 2015). Rooted in the framework of care ethics, our study engaged in reflexive dialogues among four researchers hailing from diverse backgrounds encompassing differences in tenure, age, and ethnicity. Our primary focus was nurturing relational and embodied care within the context of feminist collaboration.

Throughout this journey, we achieved several noteworthy outcomes. Initially, we embarked on a phase of self-oriented reflexivity. Following the introduction and discussions around feminist collaboration and care, this self-awareness evolved into a form of other-oriented reflexivity, fostering greater acceptance and a profound understanding of each other's precarious experiences, struggles, and uncertainties within the workplace. In the spirit of collaboration, we encouraged openness in terms of expressing emotions and embodied experience in collaborations, and collectively forged a shared commitment, articulating our motivations to spearhead transformative change, aiming to cultivate a more equitable, caring, and inclusive collaborative culture within academia.

By infusing feminist values of relationality and care in dialogues, our study contributes to the evolving metaphorical praxis of feminist collaboration, as proposed by Long et al. (2020). Furthermore, we delved into the concept of reflexive dialogue, emphasizing relationality and care as essential and generative components. This approach has unfolded as an evolving and generative process (e.g., Tronto, 2015), manifesting in several distinct ways.

First, the process of reflexive becoming materialized as we gained new insights and knowledge about prevailing academic collaborations, which are often centered on high productivity and driven by an individualist discourse—a narrative we both belong to and contribute to sustaining. In this context, our reflexive dialogues centered on care facilitated a process of co-learning and co-becoming, resulting in a deeper understanding of our relationships with others. It highlighted how our privileges, roles, and choices can either perpetuate the existing system or contribute to bringing about positive change for the community.

Crucially, the active integration of feminist values of care played a pivotal role in how we 'handled' our differences. Through responsive comments addressing diverse perspectives and personal experiences, we transformed individual narratives into shared spaces for exploration. These dialogues enabled us to pay attention to, understand, and accept divergent viewpoints, leading to profound insights about each other. Ultimately, they aligned us toward our collective goal of effecting positive changes in academic life.

Secondly, we underscore that feminist collaboration is a dynamic partnership characterized by embodied *co-learning* and *co-becoming*. By incorporating care and focusing on embodied experiences, we engaged in profound reflections oriented toward others. These reflections stemmed from our awareness of multifaceted identities, privileges, and disadvantages. This process allowed us to cultivate a reflexive becoming together by embracing embodied connectedness rooted in the realm of emotions, vulnerabilities, and the expression of sentiments.

We incorporated care principles, as previously articulated by Mayeroff (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 13) when he stated: "To care for someone, I must know many things. I must know, for example, who the other is, what his powers and limitations are, what his needs are, and what is conducive to his growth." We followed this and embarked on a journey to understand others by openly sharing our own experiences. This transformational process evolved from self-oriented reflexivity into an embrace of other-oriented considerations, as we exchanged our embodied experiences in hindsight.

This journey allowed us to develop a corporeal dimension of morality that transcended the boundaries of our individual perspectives and experiences. By attentively acknowledging others' struggles, needs, and potential for growth through the emotional resources of empathy (Hamington, 2004), we fostered emotional connections with one another and extended this empathy to those whom we may not have known personally but presumed to be

experiencing similar challenges. This collective empathetic stance fueled the generation of potential interventions for fostering supportive collaborations (e.g., Johansson & Wickström, 2023).

We hold a strong faith in the notion that collaboration is a feminist strategy in the academy (e.g., Pratt, 2010). Care facilitated a deepened insight about the condition of work in academia recognizing our dependence and connectedness with others. This acknowledgment of our proactive improvisations, as outlined by Long et al. (2020), led us to propose a *Feminist Caring Collaboration* in the academy. Our proposal for Feminist Caring Collaboration does not imply any exclusionary notions in terms of gender and gendered experiences. Instead, this approach highlights relationality and interpersonal connectedness as the foundation for a constellation of academic collaborations, promoting caring collaborations amongst individuals regardless of their genders, backgrounds, and/or identities that may be disadvantaged. We argue that, to accomplish our collective vision, future academic collaboration should be based on the recognition of the various work-life issues, dilemmas, and opportunities faced by women academics in various phases of their careers and in different life stages. *Feminist Caring Collaboration* emphasizes inclusivity regarding diversified individual backgrounds and a broadened view of productivity. And it brings the long-neglected aspect of well-being back to the fore. That is, the value of happiness, satisfaction, and pleasure needs to be accounted for as a valuable base for collaborations, too. Our sense of self is dependent on how we relate to others and the community. We suggest valuing friendship and sentiments such as joy, satisfaction, and strengthened self-confidence as liable and desired outcomes of a *Feminist Caring Collaboration*, adding to a broadened perspective of academic productivity. Although we highlight women's capacity in transforming the academy, we do not intend to exclude any gender from a *Feminist Caring Collaboration*, but embrace the prospect of persons of all races, gender, ethnicity, age, and academic ranking contributing to caring collaborations, with a principle of situating knowledge through caring about each other's needs and development.

We, thereafter, pledged as a group to embody this through everyday encounters with others, and practices at work to effect change within the contextual constraints. For this pledge, we promote care, caring relations, and embodied aspects of knowing and learning as the basis for the generative strengths of feminist collaborations. We materialized this pledge through collaboration in this work by incorporating care and taking responsibility for enhancing others' and our own condition in academia as a collective goal. The results of this work thus shed light on possibilities for changing the current individualist culture in academia. We argue that incorporating concepts of feminist care in daily work, encouraging reflexive interpersonal communications, and establishing new perspectives on relations and the purpose of work engender caring collaborations.

Furthermore, by intentionally adding relationality and care as necessary elements in our reflections on daily work, the process of research becomes generative of new ideas of reflexivity and academic collaborations (Ahmed, 2017; Tronto, 2015) that render possibilities of alternative practices, challenging the status quo. Care is embodied knowledge acquired through the body's open-ended transaction with its environment; care is an ability to expand the imagination, transcending our physical limitations and extrapolating our caring knowledge to others, including those we are unfamiliar with (Hamington, 2004, p. 3–5). And caring habits can be nurtured through repetitive practices of the body's caring knowledge (e.g., Hamington, 2004, p. 3–5). We therefore suggest that reflexive dialogue with feminist values of care in focus may be used as a practice in academic work.

This work acknowledges that instrumental collaboration practices have consistently forced academics to strive for success and competition by focusing on generating accountable research outputs as a means of proving the performance and promoting themselves. In our writing practice, we set productivity limits, attend to individual constraints, and embrace differences and constructive inefficiency among the four of us as authors, recapturing the pause, model reflexive, and our ethical academic beings to acknowledge a variety of ways to collaborate, as inspired by Long et al. (2020), a recent theorization of feminist collaboration. This is where we find a hopeful appraisal, and a brighter future could be induced and extended to further maneuver our academic working lives and make a difference by promoting feminist collaborations grounded in notions of care. In our reflexive conversations about what feminist collaboration entails, in our socializing, researching, and interacting with one another, as well as in our material, market-driven academic institutions, we have expanded the embodied collective possibilities of

enacting ethical relationality. We use this collaborative writing space to creatively resist the constraints and 'otherness' associated with the universal meritocratic system that could prevent us from collaborating in an inclusive, feminist fashion, and we express these via our suppressed and nurturing lived experiences. This provides us with an opportunity and a safe space to interrogate how we socialize, research, collaborate, and write down our reflexive dialogues, which further enables us to rethink the ethic of care, embedded in daily practice, to produce relational knowledge with transformative potential for changing the instrumentalist ways of collaboration. Such an attitude to advocating for feminist collaboration could also be viewed as a collective resistance initiative based on care, generosity, trust, and solidarity (also see Einola et al., 2021), with the goal of empowering alternative ways to counter against the highly individualistic, excluding force of instrumental collaboration, which, in most circumstances, is dominated by mainstream, white, senior, male scholars. It also offers a way to promote transformative collaborative activities and joint actions, in a wider academic community.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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