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‘You’re working, but you’re not working:’ Academic Precarity, Ambivalence and use of Researchers as Factotums

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Abstract

This article explores an important aspect of academic precarity: the use of fixed-term contract researchers as factotums within universities. The practice can be defined as the taking-on of tasks that are outside of core research activities, including substantial amounts of time spent teaching, supervising students and preparing research proposals, often at the behest of tenured staff members, reflecting existing power dynamics within the organisation. At a theoretical level, it is argued that this aspect of academic precarity reflects various forms of ambivalence in researchers’ lives, creating tensions in addition to expanding their workloads. Using evidence from 54 interviews with researchers of least five years’ experience based at research units in Portugal, conducted during 2022 and 2023, it is possible to illustrate various aspects of academic precarity and ambivalence, with different responses from researchers, including acceptance of and resistance towards the factotum role.

Keywords Ambivalence; Factotum; Portugal; Precarity; Researcher

Wordcount 7,992

Introduction

While the contribution made by fixed-term contract researchers to their universities can be measured in terms of scientific outputs, also prominent are the additional tasks they perform on behalf of these institutions, including teaching, supervising students and securing funding for research projects. These extra duties can be unproblematic in moderation, but as the range of activities and amount of time spent on these tasks expands, concerns start to emerge about the impact on researchers' own work and well-being. In this article, this practice is interpreted as an example of the use of researchers as factotums. This term denotes persons undertaking additional tasks in their organisation, often motivated, in the case of fixed-term contract staff, by insecurities related to lack of tenure. Rather than being driven by financial imperatives, they become factotums hoping that additional service will position them favourably in regard to future opportunities, suggesting that the practice is part of an informal gatekeeping process; a pathway out of temporary research work and into a teaching position offering a higher level of stability.

While the use of researchers as factotums might be justified through arguing that it is simply a means of providing opportunities for inexperienced workers to broaden their skills base, this rationale only applies to people in the relatively early stages of their careers. For experienced researchers, who already have a wide range of capacities, continuing to take-on additional responsibilities is more likely to be seen as an encumbrance and a drain on their time, a potential problem in a fixed-term contract situation. This realisation explains why this article focuses exclusively on researchers with at least five years of post-PhD experience. Additionally, analysis is based on research conducted in Portugal, a country wherein the research profession has come under intense scrutiny due to concerns regarding precarity in academic institutions.

The Academic Precariat

While there is long-standing awareness of precarity in many professions, often described in terms of flexible or insecure working conditions (Vosko 2010), discussion of this issue in higher education is less visible, despite awareness of inequalities related to a ‘bifurcated system’ of university governance (Gappa and Leslie 1993: 3), centred on power differentials between permanent and temporary staff that help maintain the eminence of the former and the adjunct status of the latter (Kimber 2003). Recent scholarship has nevertheless informed debate on an ‘academic precariat’ (Burton and Bowman 2022: 499) that is defined not only in terms of formal working conditions but also the culture of an institution, including its internal power dynamics.

Although studies have emerged on precarity during the years immediately after completing a PhD (see, e.g., Browning, Thompson and Dawson 2017; Aarnikoivu et al. 2019), when a fight for survival among aspiring academics is thought to be taking place (Hollywood et al. 2022), research on experienced non-tenured faculty members is limited. An important exception is recent work in Australia, highlighting challenges that emerge after the passing of the initial career milestones (Spina et al. 2022). This includes a critique of the processes through which academic careers progress, that can be interpreted as taking advantage of non-tenured academic staff, related to their need to court the approval of core faculty members in order to advance, a theme further explored in this article via conceptualising certain aspects of research work as factotum activity.

The Researcher as Factotum

In practice, this involves shifting substantial teaching and bureaucratic burdens from permanent staff members onto temporary colleagues, much of this additional work non-renumerated. Sociologically, there are precedents, although prior studies have tended to focus on the use of

students as unpaid assistants (Daine et al. 1973: 74), justifying the practice in terms of university cost-cutting. This suggests that the use of factotums is partly pragmatic, arising from the need to cut costs and limit the number of full-time faculty members on the payroll, and giving the core faculty members expanded workloads. Tasks that these core staff members believe can be delegated are then transferred to those who appear to have time to spare: students (Daine et al. 1973), or in the case of this study, fixed-term contract researchers.

Another driver is more tacit, but no less important: the idea that career advancement within the institution is dependent upon doing this additional work. The trade-off for being a factotum is the enhanced prospect of eventually becoming a permanent faculty member, despite the potentially detrimental impact on the researcher's own career development. From this point of view, the encumbrance is seen as fair exchange, since the researcher imagines that they will, eventually, receive something substantial in return. Whether this actually happens remains to be seen, but the arrangement means researchers being hobbled not only by extra work but also indecision about what constitutes a priority, choosing between what matters most to their career, now and in the future.

Ambivalence in Academia

Ambivalence is an apt word for describing this position in conceptual terms, given the dualism in researchers' working lives. This is a well-established sociological theme, reflecting problematic relations that exist between 'master' and 'disciple' in the workplace (Merton and Barber 1976: 5-6), that also reveal some of the limitations that arise out of this arrangement. This relates to the belief that tension arises from the realisation of the 'master' that the 'disciple' is their replacement, alongside the need to preserve the integrity of the academic profession as defined by the elder

party, leading to ‘opposing normative tendencies in the social definition of a role’ (Merton and Barber 1976: 12, 20). This argumentation implies that ambivalence, and by association, researchers’ precarity, is being manufactured out of the need for superiors to put potential successors into a kind of stasis position in which they can be ‘employed’ in service of the superior party, that comes to define the professional relationship between the two. From this point of view, the use of researchers as factotums is not then entirely pragmatic, economically or otherwise in service of the institution, but rather rooted in the professional insecurity of senior staff, who use the practice to effectively slow down the competition and take advantage of their vulnerabilities.

To make this happen, the definition of work itself becomes ambivalent. Factotum tasks are defined in positive terms by the master, presented as opportunities to gain valuable experience, something the disciple might accept at face value (Smelser 1991: 5). Furthermore, even if the ‘true’ nature of factotum work becomes apparent, the tasks may still be grudgingly accepted due to awareness of the superior’s gatekeeping function in the institution, leading to a need to disguise personal misgivings. Becoming a factotum can then be seen as representing a kind of ‘voluntary emotional dependency’ (Smelser 1991: 9), with researchers locked into subaltern organisational roles for their own pragmatic reasons, and with an element of complicity, hoping that the short-term sacrifice of their liberty will lead to worthwhile outcomes at a later date.

Recognition of ambivalence as a fundamental aspect of precarity in academia diverges from theorizations advanced in prior studies related to more general labour market conditions, that nevertheless should remind us that the more imaginative aspects are re-enforced by actual contractual situations and ambiguities related to the breakdown of boundaries between personal and professional spheres (Fuchs Epstein and Kalleberg 2004). This relates not only to inferior working conditions, including the ability to access to adequate welfare, but also harder to quantify

feelings of self-worth, with job insecurity undermining well-being as well as economic integrity, implying a deconstruction of ‘ontological insecurity’ (Giddens 1991), increased risk (Beck 1992), uncertainty (Bauman 2000) and vulnerability (Butler 2004).

These considerations lead me to consider a more specific aspect of Standing’s (2011) adoption of the ‘precariat’ portmanteau (Bourdieu 1998), which defines workers in terms of a lack of certain citizenship rights. While this is presumed to disproportionately affect the young, the old, women and people with a recent history of migration (see also Vosko 2010), affecting their capacity to make meaningful transitions to the labour market, I would also add that intra-institutional transitions are also affected. More specifically, I argue that it is a generalised security/insecurity dyad that becomes definitional, affecting people irrespective of their socio-demographic characteristics, and in the case of the research profession, traversing disciplinary bounds, a reflection that has influenced the research design of the study discussed in the second part of this article that covers people from a wide range of scientific backgrounds. This is dyad is ultimately what separates core from periphery, with the hope that the latter can become part of the former making researchers work much harder than they contractually need to.

Academic Precarity in Portugal

The remainder of this article focuses exclusively on evidence from Portugal, specifically, interviews with fixed-term contract researchers. For people not familiar with this context, this is a country that hosts a significant number of dedicated researchers at its universities, many at postdoctoral level, who are expected to devote most if not all of their time to a research work plan that formed the basis of their application for funding. While this position may appear as a luxury to readers who find that they have little or no time for their own research due to teaching or

administration workloads, this arrangement is well-established in Portugal, the basic rationale being to enhance the country's scientific productivity through enabling sufficient numbers of people to dedicate themselves exclusively to activities such as academic publishing and the pursuit of external research funds, while also helping to diversify the scientific workforce (Horta, Meoli and Santos 2022). This makes these researchers different from lecturers who are allocating part of their time to conducting fieldwork or participating in research projects as part of a team, perhaps in a supervisory capacity, since researchers are not expected to split their workloads in a manner that prioritises teaching, like lecturers, since doing so would obviously threaten the integrity of the definition of their position as researcher.

In more basic terms, enhancing academic productivity in Portugal through employing postdoctoral level researchers is seen as more cost-effective than recruiting more lecturers: they are paid less and have fewer outgoings in regard to rights and entitlements. That the state has limited resources helps explain why Portuguese universities have come to depend upon fixed-term contract researchers, following the logic outlined by Gappa and Leslie (1993), with fixed-term contracts also ensuring that expenditure is time limited as opposed to being an open-ended commitment. The arrangement makes good financial sense for Portuguese universities in other respects. Most researchers in Portugal are financed by the state, often via individual scholarships administered by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), meaning that their salaries do not come out of faculty budgets. This includes postdoctoral researchers recruited via annual calls that ran between the mid-1990s and 2016, succeeded by what was termed the Individual Call to Scientific Employment Stimulus (colloquially known as the CEEC programme) between 2017 and 2023. The existence of a substantial population of fixed-term workers, many of whom are highly experienced, explains why Portugal is a suitable research site for exploration of academic precarity

and the researcher as factotum phenomenon, also shows why this issue has attained visibility at national level, focusing on the lack of stability and sustainability in research careers, even for internationally-distinguished scholars (Valera 2023).¹

Methodological Approach

In regard to methodological approach, the main focus is on interviews with a cross-section of researchers, conducted as part of a project exploring the development of their careers in Portugal, entitled <blinded>.² In total, 100 interviews were conducted at 28 research units across continental Portugal during a 12-month period between October 2022 and September 2023, although only those on fixed-term contracts and with at least five years of full-time experience are included in the analytical framework of this article.

The researcher population itself is characteristically fluid, with people moving in and out of employment, and entering and exiting the profession. There is hence no typical or representative researcher in Portugal. However, the sample of 100 cases was not a random selection. The 28 university-based research units were chosen according to the typology used by the Portuguese government in the *FCT Atlas of Research Units* (2022), with six disciplinary categories: Natural Sciences, Engineering and Technological Sciences, Medical and Health Sciences, Agricultural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities. This meant covering all these fields in sufficient depth, and taking into account geographical location. A minimum of three units were chosen in each of the six areas, with some addition cases required in the case of Humanities due to the diversity of this field.

In each of the 28 institutions, the unit director was interviewed, then researchers recruited from the same centres, identified via information published on institutional websites. A minimum

of ten interviews were conducted in each of the six fields, not counting the interviews with senior staff. All but one of the research unit directors were tenured faculty members, while only two of the other researchers had permanent contracts. This meant that the sample of 100 interviewees included 34 tenured researchers and 66 people on fixed-term contracts, with 12 of these cases removed from the present analytical frame due to having less than five years of experience. In regard to the contracts of the 54 researchers who are discussed in this article, the vast majority were financed via FCT fellowships, with two cases supported by European Commission grants from Horizon projects.

Table 1 provides an outline of the 54 interviewees' disciplinary backgrounds, along with gender, location and time since completion of PhD. All names have been pseudonymised and socio-demographic details omitted to protect privacy.

Insert Table 1 here

Throughout the study, high ethical standards were maintained due to the sensitive nature of the research, with interviewees provided with details of the study, the author and the funding agency, with consent confirmed prior to the start of each interview. After the securing of this consent, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed, translated and analysed by the author.

Results

Given the breadth of the research questions and the limited amount of space in this article, the main emphasis will be on the researcher-as-factotum theme, with discussion structured around the

nature and extent of factotum tasks, ambivalence arising from balancing multiple demands and different reactions to this situation. These themes emerged out of an open analysis of the transcripts, which highlighted the importance of teaching, supervision of students and preparation of research proposals as tasks, also revealing significant divergences in interviewees' responses.

The Researcher as Factotum

An initial assessment of the interview transcripts confirmed that teaching was by far the most common additional task taken on by researchers, coupled with supervision of students, especially at Master's level. All of the interviewees did such work, with most engaged in the delivery of lectures on a regular basis. This may explain why this activity is seen as an integral part of the job, an impression confirmed by Maria, a researcher in biotechnology based at a university in the north of Portugal:

I think it's common for a lot of us scientists or researchers to be also supervising students, Bachelor students, Master's students and PhD students eventually. [...] Most of the researchers take-on some part of teaching activities and the working day usually revolves around this. So, we have computer work, we have bench work, we have teaching, we have supervising, we have reports to write, and tests to grade, and so on and so on.

Maria also indicates that 'the working day usually revolves around' teaching, meaning that this takes precedence over research, leading to a potential loss of focus on core activities. Despite this scenario, combining teaching and research is an accepted practice in many research institutions in Portugal, and endorsed by funding agencies like FCT, who permit universities to use their

researchers as invited lecturers, but only for a limited number of hours during a semester. However, the amount of time officially registered only refers to time spend giving classes, failing to acknowledge the efforts required in preparing lessons and evaluating students, meaning that limits are routinely surpassed.

While this does not appear to be a particularly satisfactory state of affairs, some interviewees noted that supervising students created relatively few difficulties due to the small numbers involved. More exceptionally, in research centres that host large numbers of postgraduates, the task became harder to manage. The solution was noted by Davide, a physicist based at an inter-disciplinary research centre in the centre of Portugal: to recruit postgraduate students to supervise other students.

On a day-to-day basis, I'm doing what all researchers do, I guess, which is supervising students. [...] The group is pretty big. I have probably 50 people now. But we have them divided into smaller groups. We have a subgroup of about ten people [and] have students helping those people and guiding them, and doing experiments in the lab. [...] All of this is kind of running in tandem with helping out in teaching and all the other random things that you end up doing.

This suggests that there is a level of factotum activity beneath the contract researcher, with the practice extended to the postgraduate student population (see also Daine et al. 1973). Harking back to the theoretical discussion on ambivalence, it might then be said that researchers can also become 'masters,' albeit still in the service of their institution rather than own interests. Just as lecturers and administrators delegate the tasks they cannot manage to researchers, researchers pass

on their excess work to their students, justified by the belief that this is ‘what all researchers do,’ hence, normalising the practice.

Looking beyond teaching and supervising, working on project proposals is another major part of researchers’ workloads, with time spent on this activity justified not only out of the desire to secure funding for the university but also enhancement of personal career profile. This work is obviously diverse. Some proposals are seen as an individual’s property while others are made as part of a team or network of research units. Other divides are evident between ‘soft’ money, relatively easy to secure small amounts of money given at local level for the delivery of specific services, and larger but more exceptionally awarded funds from national and international entities such as the European Commission. Not surprisingly, the latter tend to be seen as the priority, although many researchers are engaged in the preparation of multiple proposals for different funders. This situation is illustrated by Sofia, a chemist based at a laboratory in the north of Portugal:

Obviously, you’re spending lots of time building applications, where you’re working, but you’re not working [on research]. Well, it’s good to have other applications. But sometimes, I have to stop doing things for [name of research unit] because I have to be dedicated to writing projects or writing fellowships for myself, or just trying to do networking because it’s really important for our CVs. [But] we cannot focus only on our own research because we also have to do other things at the same time. So, it is a lot of stress, and you also need to know what you’re going to be doing next year [...] and sometimes I have to stop because I cannot continue working on this thing because I have

to say yes to this other thing. So, ok, I have to move on to other projects, and leave behind the work that I really enjoy.

Sofia provides an illustration of the tensions generated by competing demands: whether or not to focus on enhancing one's own CV or contribute more to the institution. Even if people want to do both, it is not always possible due to the lack of time with the dilemma itself creating more tension, illustrating the spread of ambivalence in academia. Pragmatic choices hence need to be made, influenced by an assessment of the chances of success and amount of time required for each proposal, with there always being a major risk of wasting one's time and ending up with nothing to show for these efforts. The phrase used by Sofia, 'you're working, but you're not working,' perfectly encapsulates the ambivalence associated with such situations, so much so that it provides an apt title for this article.

That multiple tasks in different domains are being undertaken also means a researcher must have a wide range of skills and competencies, as well as the ability to combine activities. As explained by Renata, another chemistry researcher based at a university in the north of Portugal, the onus is on the individual to be 'organised' and know how to prioritise:

To be honest, it's not easy. I am lucky because I'm organised, and I [...] always have this in mind, to keep focused on the essential. I have to do some stuff that is essential, some [other things that] are more urgent but not so essential. I try to see this [distinction] very clearly and make the right choices. And sometimes, for example, like when I decided to apply the first time to a Cost Action, there were also FCT projects, but I was pregnant, nine months or eight months. So, I decided that I wouldn't apply to FCT projects and my target

would be a Cost Action. [Unfortunately] that was the year FCT funded 30 per cent of project proposals, and I didn't get the Cost project approved at the time.

Renata illustrates that the balancing of priorities is difficult, with different options in regard to funding sources, in this case between the ambitious choice of a European level Cost Action and a FCT project based in Portugal. In her case, the choice of the former did not pay-off, at least not in the short-term, with decision-making complicated by personal considerations such as a major life event like a pregnancy.

One other important scenario worth relating pertains to highly experience researchers, typically at principal investigator level, who may have over 20 years of service. As Table 1 indicates, such people are exceptional, with very few researchers funded by FCT or other agencies at this level. This obviously raises questions as to use of such individuals as factotums. As António, a researcher in materials based in the north of Portugal, explained, almost all his time is spent is occupied by various internal and external committees and boards, including leadership of a research network.

I would say right now, I belong to the board of directors of [research network], which is a fairly important research infrastructure in Portugal [...]. I feel that's recognition of something that I have done in the past. [...] I'm also coordinator for research and development at the [name of faculty]. My team now is about 35 people and it comprises such things as laboratories, [...] animal facilities, library archive and projects.

From a positive point of view, we can see António as making a quite extensive contribution to his institution, and to a network of research units. However, as he related in course of the interview, he feels that he no longer has any time to pursue his own work, meaning that he has basically stopped doing research. Whether or not this can be viewed as an example of the factotum phenomenon is debatable, given the importance of what he is doing, but it should be a concern that someone contracted to an institution as a principal investigator is not working as a researcher but rather almost exclusively being an administrator.

Ambivalence and the ‘Precariatized’ Mindset

In trying to make sense of the evidence presented in the preceding section, there are signs of various forms of ambivalence arising from competing demands on interviewees’ time. This can be expressed in terms of a loss of definition in the researcher role arising from the taking on of numerous extraneous tasks as part of the ‘disciple’ role and prevarication about future career opportunities, with this ambivalence becoming an integral part of their precarity. Therefore, as well as the more traditional forms of job insecurity – long hours, low pay and fixed-term contracts – academic precarity can extend to taking-on a self-sacrificial disposition that can be seen as demonstrating a ‘precariatized’ mindset (Standing 2011, 31).

In more concrete terms, the researcher’s position in the university can also be redefined in terms of its ‘materiality’ (Brooks and Waters 2018). While classic studies such as Latour and Woolgar (1986) locate researchers firmly within the confines of the laboratory, the reality is that they can also be found in the lecture theatre. The interviews also confirmed that much of their working lives are not even spent inside the research unit but rather in the domestic sphere, with researchers’ homes taking the place of university facilities, remote working being the norm even

prior to its popularisation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have then another form of ambivalence, that goes beyond more familiar forms of dualism, with an imaginative and literal redefining of the researcher's role in a manner that has a potentially deep impact on their lives.

Added to this is the feeling of being marginalised within a university hierarchy, subject to the 'master' and 'disciple' dynamic that becomes uncomfortable and oppressive. What ensues is explained by Rita, a geologist working at a research centre in the centre region:

In the university, you have this dynamic, where you really don't know where the researcher begins and where the teacher ends. [...] I am considered good enough to teach with my research contract, but I am not good enough to be assimilated by the university. [...] So, they don't see fit to pay us for a teaching job but they will happily use our time to give classes, you know? So, you have this dual dynamic that we really don't understand [and] this tendency for there to be looseness between researchers and professors.

We have then a breakdown in boundaries between different work spheres (Fuchs Epstein and Kalleberg 2004), in terms of status and material position, a 'looseness' that creates confusion and consternation, familiar signs of precarious employment, defined by a mix of paid and effectively unpaid tasks, with the work conducted at times and places not traditionally associated with 'Laboratory Life' (Latour and Woolgar 1986). Complicating this situation further is an awareness among the interviewees of these inconsistencies. Rita considers herself 'good enough' to be teaching but is not considered worthy by her university of being employed as a teacher, presumably due to the higher financial costs of contracting her as a lecturer.

The interviewees also know that their precarious position within the institution is grounded in the economic reality of universities not having funds, or not wanting to spend their funds, on personnel. For example, Elisabete, an information technology specialist based at a medical research unit in the north of the country, is well-aware of the realities of university finance and staffing levels, and relates how this defines her own position:

Because there is no money [...] in universities. [...] Another issue is that we don't have enough people to work in administration, not enough people that manage things, not enough people anywhere, [...] people are overwhelmed with work and they cannot do it. [...] A place cannot only have teachers because teachers cannot do all the rest of the work that needs to be done in preparing the rooms and the technical part and everything. We need people for that and we are seeing lots of shortages of people that can do this work.

It is hard to argue with the accuracy of this assessment of academic life in many universities, including recognition of endemic understaffing issues and shortcomings arising from a lack of transversal skills among teaching staff. Ironically it is the flexibility and adaptability of researchers that saves the day, two qualities generally seen as positive attributes that also make them ideal factotums.

Lest this account paint too virtuous an impression of researchers, there are people who treat the job somewhat differently. This may be due to a loss of interest in what they are doing or having accepted a researcher position as a secondary option, suggesting that they are willing 'disciples.' In the former case, the opportunity to engage in non-research work comes to be seen as preferable, such as in the case of João, based at a medical research unit in the north of Portugal:

I started to get more invitations on behalf of the university to do more support work in terms of research activities. Early on, I realised that I probably did not actually like doing research that much, and preferred to be involved only with a particular topic. [After] my PhD, I immediately got asked to help out in project management, in grant applications and support activities, supervising the students and so on. So, to me that was a bit strange because it was not how I envisioned my future career, but it was something, well, I felt that I was good at it.

Another scenario is one of a disenchanted researcher actively cultivating a lecturer persona: this does not involve a refusal to do research work, but it is de-emphasised, with opportunities to be integrated into teaching activities seen as more important. This reflects a long-term orientation towards teaching for José, a researcher in geophysics based in the centre of Portugal, for whom a research career was always a reluctant choice:

In truth, I didn't want to be a researcher. I wanted to be a teacher because my vocation is teaching. One of the requirements of my university, [name of institution], was that I had to have a doctorate to be able to teach. That's it. And obviously those who teach here also do some research, don't they? But my first motivation was to teach and research came second.

José's account demonstrates one more form of ambivalence, albeit with the researcher generating their own disinterest in their own profession, hoping that redirecting their efforts towards teaching will lead towards eventually becoming a lecturer. This was, however, an outlying

position within the sample, in fact, the only such case encountered in the course of the research, suggesting that this disposition is uncommon.

The Researchers' Response

In looking at researchers' responses to the various forms of ambivalence that define their positions, two means of escape emerge: accepting that 'researcher' is a subaltern position and taking on factotum tasks, albeit grudgingly, or resisting the practice via the pursuit of opportunities that appear to have the potential to enhancing the researcher's own career profile. The former position includes people like José, who prioritise teaching, and others like Rita, who try to make themselves indispensable to the organisation via research and teaching, even if they are unhappy with the arrangement. While this appears logical in regard to enhancing chances of career progression, the effectiveness of this approach may be compromised by the relative scarcity of teaching positions, especially tenured posts. It does not matter how much a researcher is contributing to the university if little or no recruitment is taking place.

The other pathway involves a narrow focus on activities that are seen as instrumental to individual career progression: publishing in prestigious journals as primary or sole author, participating in international networks in a leadership capacity and securing funds for projects as principal researcher rather than team member or subsidiary partner. European funding awards are seen as the highest priority. Among those who had managed to win major funding awards was Rafaela, based at a philosophy research centre in the centre of Portugal. She also related how dissatisfaction with her working conditions became the source of motivation to apply for a European Research Council grant:

I knew from the start that I had to get a better position [...] And to be honest I thought my best bet was to win an ERC, to be an ERC consolidator. That way I can guarantee the liberty I want to research, the financial support, the recognition, [...] I felt that at that time, I could not rely on institutions or FCT [...]. I studied all the possibilities and I thought the best one is in ERC. [...] It was a very long and difficult process, very complex, emotional, very difficult. [...] It's a very select group of people that go to the interview and then an even more select group that are financed. I think back on the process and it seems very smooth and very simple. But that was not, you know, how it seemed at the time, with that kind of uncertainty.

In regard to the extent of Rafaela's success, her ERC grant is worth up to two million euros, covering a period of five years. This money, however, goes to the host institution rather than Rafaela herself, confirming that the university is still the main beneficiary of her labour. It is possible that making such a contribution will be rewarded in terms of higher status should the institution have the capacity to integrate her into the core group of staff members, but it might not, particularly if the recruitment of tenured staff is not taking place. Grant winners, even of major European awards, do not become core staff members overnight. The race for research funding hence creates its own ambivalences, including the risk that achievements fail to be fully recognised by an institution.

Another risk relates to the process of preparing and submitting applications becoming a treadmill; basically, a set of self-administered factotum tasks. This was certainly the feeling of Sandra, a geographer, based at a research unit in the centre region:

I know that you are expected to apply continuously to almost any form of potential funding that is there. So, I was applying to the individual CEEC [but] then we will have the city projects, applications in June or July [...]. I know that I'm supposed to [apply] but actually it would be nice to get funding for a project of my own, for me to be super-important. Being principal investigator in a funded project. [...] No one tells me, 'Oh, you need to.' But of course, there's that kind of pressure. Like, you know, you are supposed to be super-multitasking, and apply to funding and write papers.

It is noticeable that the pressure to submit research proposals exerted on Sandra is then somewhat indirect, related to the culture of the institution rather than a formal set of instructions, and that ambivalence arises from the need to evaluate between different funding avenues, meaning that hard choices must be made. In regard to how researchers respond, one approach is to 'follow the money,' as elaborated upon by Dietmar, a philosophy researcher based in the centre region:

When people plan [a career], they want to become the expert on one thing, and then they do that. And if you're good at this, have top applications, you can succeed with that. And then you get, of course, lots of international traction. [But] you know, you have to kind of follow the money. If you're doing empirical work, applied research, knowledge transfer to stakeholders [...] if you're looking for funding, if you're looking for a project at European level. [...] I've heard from people who got Horizon 2020 projects. I mean, if you read the guide, [it's] like they were like written by politicians, for politicians, it seems to me like, do something about migrant families, or do something about this other thing because it happens to be the focus topic, then you get the funding.

The question of relevance hence looms large in the pursuit of research funds, introducing additional demands, and unpredictability, with development of a capacity to be aware of what is happening at policy level becoming essential. Using financial success as a means to escape the factotum dimension of research may however end up being somewhat futile, in exchange one set of additional tasks with others, but with additional complications.

Concluding Discussion

In bringing this discussion to a close, I have argued that researchers are being used as factotums in Portuguese universities, a pre-existing but under-theorised sociological category, used to describe the taking-on of a diverse activities and responsibilities in the service of another within an institution, with uncertain rewards. In addition to providing examples of this arrangement, I have identified some conceptual roots, most prominently, reflections based on Merton and Barber's (1976) seminal work on 'sociological ambivalence' that help explain why highly qualified and experienced workers find themselves effectively stuck in a situation that is corrosive to their personal and professional development, and raises question about inequalities in universities that are not necessarily made visible in prior studies of the 'academic precariat' (Burton and Bowman 2022). To summarise, they are trapped by a tension that exists, and persists for the duration of their fixed-term contracts, between 'master' and 'disciple,' with the striving of the latter to become the former helping define precarity in higher education, with various forms of over-working being detrimental to researchers and the conduct of research activity itself.

The professional worker as factotum is not a new phenomenon, nor is it exclusive to academia, but it has then consequences for the development of higher education institutions and

the people who work in them. For individuals, it wastes their time and jeopardises the integrity of their careers. For the state that pays their salaries, resources allocated for research gets spent on other activities, albeit understandably so given the relatively low level of investment and lack of human resources in many Portuguese universities, a situation I have previously attributed to the long pattern of uneven and uncertain development, before and after the transition to democracy in 1974 (Author xxxx). In making ‘factotumism’ more visible, I believe that I am able to make an original, and hopefully significant, contribution to public and policy debates on precarity, in this national context and elsewhere, as well as informing our broader understanding of how a ‘precariat’ (Standing 2011) is constituted and reproduced: not simply through poor working conditions, low pay and a lack of access to welfare (Vosko 2010), but also unequal power relationships within institutions. As such, factotum work can be seen as part of the precarity lexicon, alongside inferior contractual status.

Through looking at this practice via the evidence presented in this article, I have been able to reveal some prominent examples of how the master’ and ‘disciple’ dynamic disrupts lives and livelihoods, and there are, no doubt, many other manifestations that escape scrutiny due to the limitations of my study. For now, in looking at researchers’ responses, I can demarcate between taking-on tasks that are unambiguously in service of the institution, especially but not exclusively a devotion to teaching that is far beyond the limits set by funding institutions, and other activities that appear more individually-oriented, including the pursuit of prestigious research grants, but remain ultimately tied to making a contribution to the institution. The existence of both pathways helps explain why factotum work is pervasive, with the additional burden of work effectively robbing the researcher of time that should be spent conducting the research that forms the actual

basis of their employment contract, as well as colonising their own personal time (Fuchs Epstein and Kalleberg 2004).

While the results discussed in this article only relate to the Portuguese experience, a country that differs from other national contexts due to a long-standing practice of employing significant numbers of postdoctoral level researchers for prolonged, if time-limited, periods, readers may nevertheless recognise some of the concerns raised in their own national and regional contexts. As such, I hope that I can provide insight that helps extend this inquiry to an international level. Academic contexts not covered by my evidence, including the pressure placed on lecturers to undertake non-teaching work without formal recognition or reward, also need greater scrutiny, suggesting another important direction for future research on precarity in higher education. Looking at precarity across the duration of a career, as opposed to focusing only on point of labour market entry, also matters, with a need to look more closely at the factotum dimension of senior researchers remaining an unexplored issue.

Despite having noted a fairly negative situation, I want to end on a positive note. In Portugal, there has been a response of sorts from researchers, starting during the period in which I conducted my fieldwork, albeit too late to become part of my research agenda, that included the formation of nuclei within universities dedicated to addressing precarity, extending to political mobilisation, including the largest ever public demonstration in the capital city of Lisbon in the spring of 2023. While the success of these initiatives has not prompted change at national policy level or reform within universities, and has been disrupted further by a political crisis that led to a change of government in early 2024, researchers' precarity is finally visible in Portugal. I would however argue that it is still misunderstood, with a narrow focus on contractual situation at the expense of recognising the importance of factotum work. Until limits are placed on the capacity

of institutions to generate and distribute extraneous work to researchers, their precarity will persist, even if Portugal, and other countries, start to move beyond the limitations of fixed-term contract work.

Notes

1. One attempt to regularise postdoctoral researchers' careers, in 2017 and 2018, known as the Transitional Rule, was aimed at enabling some individuals to convert their positions from temporary to permanent posts (Author xxxx).
2. Grant number CEECIND/02453/2017.

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Table 1. List of interviewees, with gender, disciplinary field and main subject area, years since PhD completion and region

	Name	Gen	Field	Subject	PhD	Region
1	Rita	F	NAT	Geology	10+	Centre
2	José	M	NAT	Geophysics	10+	Centre
3	Cristina	F	NAT	Geophysics	10+	Centre
4	António	M	ENG	Materials	20+	North
5	Nuno	M	NAT	Geophysics	10+	Centre
6	Priscila	F	NAT	Geology	5+	Centre
7	Diogo	M	ENG	Chemistry	20+	North
8	Bernardo	M	ENG	Chemistry	10+	North
9	Elisabete	F	MED	IT	10+	North
10	Ana	F	MED	Physics	10+	North
11	Carla	F	MED	Biochemistry	5+	North
12	João	M	MED	Physics	10+	North
13	Joana	F	AGR	Biology	10+	North
14	Alexandre	M	AGR	Biology	5+	North
15	Katia	F	AGR	Biotechnology	5+	North
16	Inês	F	AGR	Biology	15+	North
17	Maria	F	AGR	Biotechnology	5+	North
18	Marta	F	AGR	Chemistry	5+	North
19	André	M	ENG	Materials	20+	North
20	Renata	F	ENG	Chemistry	10+	North

21	Sofia	F	AGR	Chemistry	10+	North
22	Rosana	F	MED	Gerontology	5+	North
23	Bianca	F	MED	Nursing	10+	South
24	Célia	F	SOC	Geography	10+	Centre
25	Catarina	F	HUM	Musicology	10+	Centre
26	Jason	M	HUM	Musicology	15+	Centre
27	Hans	M	HUM	Philosophy	5+	Centre
28	Sandra	F	SOC	Geography	5+	Centre
29	Daniel	M	SOC	Computer Science	5+	North
30	Emmanuel	M	SOC	Geography	10+	Centre
31	Diana	F	HUM	Musicology	10+	Centre
32	Dietmar	M	HUM	Philosophy	15+	Centre
33	Dulce	F	SOC	Geography	10+	Centre
34	Filipa	F	HUM	Musicology	10+	Centre
35	Kim	F	HUM	Musicology	10+	Centre
36	Gabriel	M	HUM	Philosophy	15+	Centre
37	Rafaela	F	HUM	Philosophy	10+	Centre
38	Helena	F	SOC	Anthropology	5+	North
39	Isabel	F	HUM	Philosophy	5+	North
40	Fátima	F	HUM	Philosophy	10+	Centre
41	Fernando	M	HUM	Musicology	10+	Centre
42	Davide	M	NAT	Physics	10+	Centre
43	Angelo	M	ENG	Physics	15+	Centre

44	Júlia	F	ENG	Biology	15+	Centre
45	Lígia	F	MED	Biology	10+	Centre
46	Jaime	M	ENG	Physics	10+	North
47	Margarida	F	NAT	Biophysics	5+	Centre
48	Magda	F	NAT	Geology	5+	Centre
49	Luís	M	NAT	Meteorology	5+	Centre
50	Marcelo	M	ENG	Materials	5+	North
51	Olga	F	ENG	Materials	15+	North
52	Rui	M	MED	Medicine	15+	North
53	Patricia	F	MED	Medicine	10+	Lisboa
54	Simone	M	HUM	Architecture	10+	South
