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Intimacy Coordination as a Call to Action: Embedding Processes of Care in the UK TV Industry

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Abstract

Calls for the UK TV industry to better prioritize care for workers have increased in recent years, amplified by the deficit of care exposed by recent scandals, #MeToo, Covid-19, pervasive poor mental health, and persistent inequities in the workforce. Yet, what care might look like in media production remains ill-defined. This article focuses on intimacy coordination, identified as one of several emergent roles designed to address unethical, abusive, and unreflective production practices. We consider how the profession seeks to embed processes of care in media production, and thereby challenges normative, individualist working models. We argue that looking at intimacy coordination through a feminist ethics of care lens enables a more nuanced understanding of both the labor of intimacy coordinators, and the profession's wider significance in helping to re-imagine a more caring, equitable industry that places a concern for workers' welfare at its core.

Keywords

intimacy coordination, television production, ethics of care, creative labor, worker well-being

Introduction

Calls for the UK television industry to better prioritize care for workers have increased in recent years, amplified by several scandals relating to abuse and sexual harassment, reports of punishing working conditions, worsening inequities, and pervasive poor

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mental health amongst the workforce (Bectu 2024; Creative Diversity Network 2024; Film and TV Charity 2025). Distinct moments such as #MeToo (Boyle 2024), and ongoing failures to address bullying and sexual harassment have further exposed the industry's deficit of care and the lack of appropriate safeguards to prevent abusive and exploitative working practices (Aust 2022; Bectu 2024; Bull 2023). In turn, Covid-19 and the current crisis in UK film and television production with many freelancers currently out of work, have highlighted what is at stake when care is devalued, leaving an already precarious workforce even more vulnerable, and exacerbating existing inequities related to gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability (Banks 2020; Bectu 2024). Despite numerous initiatives designed to address poor working conditions, sexual harassment, and lack of diversity in the industry's workforce, little is changing (Aust 2021; Bectu 2024; Bull 2023; Creative Diversity Network 2024).

There is critical urgency to considering labor practices that center care given that care in television production remains ill-defined and is still not being addressed in a structural way. This article offers a new and important case study of "care in practice" (Care Collective 2020, 19) by focusing on the role of the intimacy coordinator, one of the fastest growing professions in the film and television industry in recent years. Intimacy coordination has been identified as one of several emergent roles designed to address unethical, abusive, and unreflective production practices, and to prioritize workers' well-being (Horeck and Berridge 2024; Sørensen 2022; Torchin 2022). Intimacy coordinators oversee, facilitate, and choreograph scenes involving simulated sex, nudity, and other intimate content. At the pre-production stage, intimacy coordinators liaise with a range of roles and departments to clarify expectations around intimate content in specific scenes, before discussing consent with cast and crew. They then offer choreography and oversee production of scenes featuring intimacy ensuring this consent is upheld. The profession's origins are often traced back to US intimacy practitioner, Tonia Sina, who wrote about intimacy choreography in relation to theater in 2006 (Sina 2006). However, the work of intimacy coordination has gained greater momentum and visibility since #MeToo, which has prompted renewed attention to the ethics of media production.

To date, there is a relatively small body of academic literature on intimacy coordination. This work is often written by individuals with training in intimacy practice and has focused on theater and performance education (Haarhoff and Lush 2023; Steinrock 2020). Other scholarship has focused on the links between intimacy coordination and adult content creation in terms of a shared focus on "consent work" (Pennington 2024, 2). A particularly significant piece in relation to television is Sørensen's (2022) article on the rise of intimacy coordination in the US and UK screen industries, which situates the role in relation to heightened scrutiny of sexual harassment and institutional sexism post-#MeToo, along with changes to funding, and production and distribution contexts in the age of streaming and VOD portals. Sørensen (2022) valuably outlines the way in which intimacy coordination can be seen to both transform established production practices to enhance the well-being of performers and operate as a means for productions to mitigate legal, economic and reputational risk (p. 1406). Our intervention lies in exploring how intimacy coordinators' transformation of production

practices can be read as acts of care, and the tensions that exist between their proactive approach to fostering safer processes, and the industry's often reactive, "risk-management" approach, which involves shifting responsibility for safety onto individual roles without necessarily committing to more widespread structural reform (Sanson 2024).

Drawing on original interviews with twelve intimacy coordinators who work in the television industry conducted between 2021 and 2023, we explore in detail the ways in which intimacy coordinators seek to embed processes of care in television productions.[1] We define care as both a "capacity and a practice" (Care Collective 2020, 6). While care was not central to our interview questions, it emerged as a salient theme in our discussions of intimacy coordinators' motivations and priorities, their working practices on set, and their wider practitioner community. We argue that an ethos of care imbues all parts of the highly skilled labor of intimacy coordinators, which is motivated by a concern for the well-being of others, and deserves greater recognition within both academia, and the media industries. As Virginia Held (2006) explains, "the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility" (p. 10). Exploring intimacy practice through a feminist care ethics lens enables a more nuanced understanding of both the profession's labor and its wider significance in terms of re-imagining a more caring, equitable industry that foregrounds workers' welfare. Ultimately, we conclude that the nature of the care work performed by intimacy coordinators is the result of their individual and collective efforts and that they are often having to navigate industrial structures that are failing to consistently embed care into their working environments at all levels.[2]

Care and Creative Labor

The media industry's "endemic carelessness" (Torchin 2022) is intricately connected to its precarious working conditions, characterized by project-based, freelance labor, long hours, and "always on" cultures (Aust 2021). Care has long been devalued in this context, in favor of a vision of the ideal, self-reliant neoliberal worker that can withstand often punishing working conditions (Wing-Fai et al. 2015). Notably, this ideal stands in stark opposition to notions of interdependence at the heart of conceptions of care (Care Collective 2020; Tronto 1993, 23). Those in positions of power in the television sector—typically middle/upper class, white, nondisabled men—are commonly those with the means to devolve their care needs onto others and thereby hide their dependencies (Aust 2021).

Alacovska (2020) argues that the attention to the individualized, self-enterprising creative worker has resulted in a relative lack of research into the "dynamics of care, caring and compassion in creative work" (p. 727). Expanding on this point, Alacovska and Bissonnette (2021) argue for the centrality of care to creative work, exploring "alternative ways of organizing and laboring while recognizing that solidarity, concerns for others and mutuality are powerful drivers of action on a par with or even exceeding market-driven self-centredness" (p. 136). While the television industry's competitive working models might promote individualist self-reliance, research into

the lived realities of creative labor reveal that practitioners highly value sociality and collaboration (Curtin and Sanson 2017).

Increasingly, creative labor scholars have turned to feminist ethics of care approaches to identify alternative working models that more centrally foreground practices of care (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2021; Aust 2021; O'Brien 2019). Perhaps unsurprisingly given the media industries' historic lack of attention to care, these alternatives are often found at the cultural sector's "margins," and/or in the practices of marginalized workers, commonly women (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2021; O'Brien 2019). Scholars often turn to the work of feminist philosophers to establish the foundations of their thinking around care in media production and wider creative labor, emphasizing the importance of recognizing mutual dependencies, the needs of others, and the deep relationality of this work (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2021; Aust 2021, 2022; O'Brien 2019; Tronto 1993).

Feminist production scholars theorize care in the context of illuminating the considerable emotional labor enacted by media industry workers. For example, in her study of the way in which gratitude for work functions as a barrier to eradicating poor practice in the UK television industry, Aust (2022) identifies effective communication as central to care. Anonymized quotes from television workers identify being listened to, looking out for, and speaking up on behalf of others as key aspects of good—and more caring—practice (Aust 2022, 9–13). There are parallels with Bell's (2021) study of women below-the-line workers in UK film, which draws on Arlie Russell Hochschild's influential notion of emotional labor to illuminate the importance of interpersonal communication skills to the efficient functioning of productions. Concern for others and a recognition of interdependence are also central to O'Brien's (2019) understanding of alternative work practices in the Irish media industries.

Despite the importance of care to creative labor, this essential work has often been valued less highly both economically and culturally due to its association with women and feminized departments (Bell 2021). An affinity with care is a socially constructed trait and, as Bell (2021) highlights, essentialist views of care as innate to women operate to obscure the skilled nature of this labor and reinforce unhelpful gendered binaries. Industry roles that emphasize care are also often viewed as distinct from creative labor, perpetuating gendered inequities in the workforce (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015).

It is notable that intimacy coordinators, who are predominantly—though not exclusively—women, recount being treated at times as a "box-ticking" exercise on set rather than having their creative skills valued and recognized. They raise concerns that their employment can be seen, in part at least, as a means for the media industry to *appear* more caring and avoid litigation following concerns raised by #MeToo, rather than truly committing to a duty of care to workers (Sørensen 2022; Torchin 2022). This approach can be seen as a form of "carewashing," defined as "contemporary practices in which companies try to cleanse themselves from the connotations of corporate exploitation" and instead associate themselves with "an idea of *care*" while strategically avoiding wider reform (Chatzidakis and Littler 2022, 269).

As the Care Collective (2020) remind us, care and capitalist logics remain incompatible. In the profit-driven television industry specifically, tight time and financial constraints are identified as impeding practices of care and reinforcing exploitative working conditions (Aust 2022). In the subsequent sections of this article, we build upon the work discussed here to consider in more detail how the processes of intimacy coordinators might be read as practices of care. Existing scholarship frequently explores care in relation to diverse creative roles and sectors. While this work emphasizes collaborative dimensions of creative labor, there remains a recurring focus on individual workers' experiences. Our approach is distinctive in the discussion of intimacy coordinators as a community of practitioners, who typically occupy a "department of one" on set, but who nonetheless often emphasize the collective aspects of their practice. Care is contextual, and in the analysis that follows we examine how intimacy coordinators' position in high-end television production—a position that remains open to contestation as the burgeoning profession struggles to assert itself—shapes the kind of care that is possible. What might care look like in the profit-driven television industry, and how might industry logics both enable and impede the processes of care that intimacy coordinators enact?

In pursuing these questions, this article follows in the traditions of feminist production studies, drawing on insider knowledge to recuperate and "highlight production at the margins," uncovering hidden labor that is often overlooked, and recognizing the complex skills that go into this work (Banks 2018, 157–8). We explore how intimacy coordinators center a feminist ethic of care perspective by maintaining careful relationships between individuals and roles via open communication, advocacy, and detailed considerations of consent, and by instilling ethical processes to ward against unreflective and careless practices. However, we argue that a significant tension emerges between the efforts of intimacy coordinators to meaningfully implement caring production practices and the industrial "carewashing" discussed above, a problem which continues to build in a climate of precarity and amid an ever-present, but growing backlash against #MeToo (Boyle 2024).

Methods

Our interviews took place online at a time of change in the UK television industry, as workers continued to navigate shifting Covid-19 regulations and the industry itself was still reckoning with the exposure of pervasive gendered abuses of power on set following #MeToo and subsequent scandals. While still in relative infancy, intimacy coordination was receiving increased attention in mainstream media, spurred on by the critical and popular success of several high-profile drama series that employed intimacy coordinators and were praised for their innovative depictions of sex, intimacy, and sexual violence.

Although mindful of the importance of this coverage in raising awareness of the relatively new profession, several interviewees cited a desire to correct distortions of the role in media narratives as a reason for taking part in the project. Further, there was some concern that the media focus on individual intimacy coordinators working on

specific series can risk overshadowing an understanding of the profession as a community of practitioners, working collectively to standardize processes of care across the wider sector. As a "deeply anti-auteurist" discipline, feminist production studies offers a way to navigate this individualist focus, remaining attentive to the politics of inclusion (Banks 2018, 157).

Several of the intimacy coordinators we interviewed had a public web presence, and as such, participants were recruited either directly via email, or indirectly via their agents. We then used a snowball sampling approach in that participants suggested other intimacy coordinators to speak to. A sense of shared purpose between the intimacy coordinators and us as interviewers emerged when we explained our background in researching media representations of gender, sexuality and sexual violence, and our desire to recognize their important work, "give voice to their concerns," and advocate for their inclusion in media histories (Banks 2018, 155). Participants were receptive to this and were keen to stress the collaborative aspects of the role, as well as mentioning people/organizations who may have been overlooked in public discussions of intimacy coordination to date. This shared interest reflects Ortner's (2009) arguments about "studying sideways" in production studies, where researchers and interviewees occupy the same "social space" and share similar concerns and cultural references in their discussions (p. 184). While our focus in this article is on production processes, a striking parallel emerged in our mutual recognition of the power of media representations to shape understandings of intimacy, sex, and sexual violence, and rapport was often built around a common desire to enact social change.

What Curtin and Sanson (2017) call "performances of expertise" came across very strongly in our conversations with intimacy coordinators (p. 4). As with their interviews with industry workers, we found "recurring commentary on the pleasures of craft, the opportunity to recount a creative solution or to describe a project that succeeded against all odds" (Curtin and Sanson 2017, 4). Intimacy coordinators expressed enthusiasm and passion for the job that went beyond mere "self-promotion"; in fact, this idea of promoting oneself was often actively challenged through an emphasis on the "we" of the profession over the "I" (Curtin and Sanson 2017, 4).

Caring for Others as a Motivating Factor

A central tenet of caring is taking the concerns and needs of others as the basis for action (Tronto 1993, 104). Challenging conceptions of the autonomous media worker, our interviewees told us that intimacy coordination originated out of a recognition that the needs of cast and crew were not consistently being considered and met on set during the production of intimate content. A common analogy was made to stunt practitioners, but instead of working on scenes involving physical action, they work on scenes of intimacy. However, while stunt work has a longer history, intimacy coordinator Lizzy Talbot noted that when working on intimate scenes:

> There were no protocols, there were no safety techniques, there were no standards, it was a bit of a free for all. I started researching this and I put out a call on Facebook, I think, in 2016 asking people what was [their] experience with intimate scenes? The responses

> were 95% had a negative to extremely negative experience of intimate scenes, and 90% had a negative experience of intimate scenes. Honestly, that was to a Facebook group that consisted predominantly of women.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

Recognition of the pervasiveness of poor practice in the production of intimate content informed the development of Talbot's intimacy practice. Parallel research was being developed around the same time in other parts of the world, exposing the urgent need for safer processes on sets. This urgency increased following #MeToo.

Prior to the development of intimacy coordination, scenes involving simulated sex and nudity were often treated informally, with actors left to work scenes out for themselves, leading to a potential blurring of personal and professional boundaries and creating conditions for harm. Our interviewees frequently identified instances of good practice prior to the role's establishment, but these were precariously linked to individual directors. Creative labor scholars often identify informality as contributing to the sector's carelessness, promoting an unreflective approach to labor that fosters conditions for exploitation and perpetuates inequities in the workforce (Curtin and Sanson 2017; Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; Wing-Fai et al. 2015, 11). Informality also underlies traditional discourses of creativity and becomes a means by which abusive working conditions are dismissed and justified. For example, Torchin (2022) identifies the idea of the "chaotic and risky" practices of the "creative genius" as antithetical to a careful approach to creative labor that foregrounds workers' well-being.

Intimacy coordinators are typically industry insiders—most commonly actors, movement, or fight directors—who have lived experience of these informal working practices. For instance, intimacy coordinator Katharine Hardman told us about "awful auditions" she experienced as an actor where she was "being pushed into this realm of [. . .] bad, bad practice" (Interview with Authors, 2021). Similarly, Elle McAlpine, another actor-turned-intimacy coordinator, recounted feelings of vulnerability on a male-dominated set, in which there were no formal processes in place to protect her:

> I'm an actress by trade, so I'd worked on a few sex scenes prior to doing this and had. . . not scarring experiences, but really awkward and uncomfortable experiences doing those scenes. I remember having to ask for the makeup artist to come in the room, because crews are so heavily male and actually just me, as the actor, already vulnerable, having to ask for that, something I remember thinking, 'Why is nothing in place for me here? It feels strange.'
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

While empathy is not contingent upon having such shared experiences, they nonetheless inform the care labor enacted by many intimacy coordinators. As McAlpine noted, her experience as an actor "definitely helps, just because I know what they're going through. I guess there's a comradery and empathy there" (Interview with Authors, 2021). Care is both a practice and a disposition (Tronto 1993), and empathy is identified as a core feeling associated with care (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2021, 138). As Tronto (1993) explains, "caring requires that one start from the standpoint of the one needing care or attention. It requires that we meet the other morally, adopt the

person's, or group's, perspective and look at the world in those terms" (p. 19). Intimacy coordinators' knowledge of the industry enables a close understanding of the experiential reality of its working cultures.

Some intimacy coordinators spoke of being motivated by a "need to make waves" to address the poor treatment of intimacy content in the past, recognizing abuses of power that have occurred (Elle McAlpine, Interview with Authors, 2021). However, there were differing perspectives on "how you go about doing that in order to action that change that is needed" (Elle McAlpine, Interview with Authors, 2021). Interviewees acknowledged the industry's hierarchical nature, and the importance of simultaneously slotting into, and disrupting, these hierarchies to institute better structures of care.

Finding positive ways to collaborate and intervene in existing structures of power also emerged in relation to how intimacy coordinators care for and support those who are typically marginalized by industry hierarchies– the day players, adult performers, and background artists. Hardman, for instance, spoke of how advocacy for supporting artists is important because:

> There still is a huge hierarchical energy about, 'Oh, well they can wait for hours and sit in the back and then we'll get to their scene when we get to their scene.' There's still a power shift and if you have an A-lister with lots of supporting artists or you've got two supporting artists and an A-lister, and they're having a simulated sex scene and the A-lister is watching, the energy is all about the A-lister. Whereas for us, our energy is all about them and making sure that they feel really safe and really supported.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

This work is seen as crucial and caring because of how it helps supporting artists to divide the professional from the personal. If a supporting artist is not given a character to work with, there is a risk that they must rely on their personal experiences in a way that compromises their well-being. For intimacy coordinators, it is imperative that actors in general do not have to draw from their personal experiences in scenes of intimacy. Having a professional oversee the choreography of intimate scenes is essential, partly because of how it takes "that pressure away from people who it's not their responsibility to know" (Robbie Taylor Hunt, Interview with Authors, 2021). Instead, it is incumbent on the intimacy coordinator to learn about, and to research different kinds of intimacy. Many intimacy coordinators identified a key part of the job as researching approaches to sex in different cultures, communities, and historical moments.

Another striking motivation that emerged was a desire to diversify portrayals of sex and intimacy away from dominant, heteronormative traditions, suggesting a wider moral responsibility and care for audiences. This approach was particularly apparent in responses from women and underrepresented groups, who often commented on the inadequacy of many existing representations of sex and desire. Intimacy coordinator Adelaide Waldrop noted that their motivations lie in "diversifying and revolutionizing the way that we portray intimacy on screen," going on to position this as explicitly "activist," "being aware that until sex education is prolific and comprehensive, that a

lot of young people or people in general get information about human sexuality from movies and TV" and that if sex is not portrayed "with the ring of truth to it, then it doesn't really help enrich our society in the ways that it could" (Interview with Authors, 2021). Similarly, Robbie Taylor Hunt noted that:

> I think I fall further on the scale of like, 'Our duty..!' compared to other intimacy coordinators, but I think there is that kind of responsibility and I think we can make a big difference to that representation. Representation is such a powerful thing, visibility is such a powerful thing, it can have real impact upon a society and culture.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

Several of our interviewees articulated that a key professional motivation was to expand, diversify, and add realism to, on-screen representations of intimacy, yet recognized that their ability to do so depended on a director's willingness to work with them.

Care, Communication and Consent: Responding to Others' Needs

In creative labor scholarship, communication is often identified as a key component of care (Aust 2022; O'Brien 2019). The facilitation of open communication is a significant aspect of intimacy practice, which involves "more listening [. . .] than talking, and more understanding where people are coming from" (Tigger Blaize, Interview with Authors, 2021). Intimacy coordinators liaise with diverse roles to facilitate this communication, resonating with Curtin and Sanson's (2017) views that media labor is underpinned by "an extended web of relationships" that must be sustained, although the intricacy of such relationships is often overlooked in scholarly accounts (p. 6).

If sex scenes have historically been treated vaguely and informally, intimacy coordinators seek to clarify the nature of intimacy in a scene and promote detailed communication of expectations early on in productions. Use of precise language is extremely important to this communication as a key aspect of the role is "to define, name and provide clarity in terminology on set" (Sørensen 2022, 1400). This attention to terminology is part of how intimacy coordinators "safeguard the dignity of cast and crew"; ensuring "that the language and phrases around intimate acts and body parts are neutral and the tone professional," and warding against the use of "gendered, condescending, or sexually charged language" (Sørensen 2022, 1400–1).

The clarification of expectations resonates with Aust's (2022) view that "Good practice – care – is found to be incumbent on knowledge: both of what production entails and the subsequent adequate organization of it, and what can be reasonably expected of staff working on any production" (p. 13). While Aust is not focused on intimacy coordination, the core elements of effective care practice that she identifies—communication, knowledge and trust—are all central features of intimacy practice that ward against exploitative working conditions. Hardman explained, "the communication side of it adds so much because there is so much in the not knowing where we can hit dangers"

(Interview with Authors, 2021). There are numerous historic examples of (predominantly female) actors recounting experiences on set where their consent was manipulated or overlooked when working on scenes involving nudity and/or simulated sex, leading to serious emotional distress (see Stone 2021). Intimacy coordinators recognize the shame and trauma that can ensue when intimate content is treated in a de-professionalized manner, and "take care of" these concerns, which "involves assuming some responsibility for the identified need and determining how to respond to it" (Tronto 1993, 106). Significantly, this clarification of expectations helps to mitigate against poor practice, by denying an opportunity for those in senior positions to devolve their duty of care to workers under the guise of ignorance.

Communication is vital to the negotiation of consent with cast and crew, an aspect of intimacy coordination that has received significant media attention and that we have written about elsewhere (Horeck and Berridge 2024). In our interviews, consent was conceptualized in nuanced ways. As industry insiders, intimacy coordinators recognize the difficulties for cast and crew in asserting boundaries within a freelance, hierarchical, and competitive sector. Consent, then, was not just seen as verbal, and careful attention is also paid to body language, and moments of hesitation. Intimacy coordinator Vanessa Coffey reflected:

> I think there's something about having a level of emotional intelligence to listen [. . .] to the physical as well as the literal – the words, the sound of the words, how people are saying them and also the physicality that goes with that.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

When discussing consent, intimacy coordinators are both attentive and responsive to others' needs, which are central tenets of feminist understandings of care (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2021; Tronto 1993, 138). This attention and responsiveness are evidenced through their repeated definition of consent as an ongoing process and something that can be retracted. The idea of "no" as powerful underlines intimacy practice and was a recurring phrase across the interviews. If an actor retracts their consent, intimacy coordinators will respond quickly to find a creative solution that respects their boundaries while fulfilling the scene's requirements. As Coffey explained, there can be a discrepancy between what an actor consents to and their feelings on the day, which means they must remain responsive to people changing their mind:

> Before we get to set on the day people say, 'Yeah, yeah, I'm comfortable with that, no problem.' Then when they see what it actually looks like and they walk into the space with everybody watching them and they think about what they've agreed to, that's when sometimes we might see, 'Oh God, that's not what I want to do anymore.' So we do need to be watchful for that.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

This notion of being "watchful" also came through in discussions of the way in which intimacy coordinators will watch the monitor during the filming of intimate content, to ensure that actors' consent is upheld. This constitutes an ethical gaze to be distin-

guished from a surveillant or prurient view, as has sometimes been promoted in mainstream media discussions of the profession.

Crucially, intimacy practice also stresses the need for aftercare for actors when filming intimate scenes, with space for reflection and discussion, something that hadn't consistently been in place before and was deemed particularly vital for scenes involving sexual violence. While many media articles focus on the profession's significance in protecting women on male-dominated sets, our interviewees identified male actors as particularly vulnerable in scenes of sexual violence when playing perpetrators. Following scenes, intimacy coordinators spoke of instilling trauma-informed "closure practices" defined as: "A ritual / action / exercise that aids the Performer to de-role (come out of character) and acknowledge that the intimate situation performed was not real" (Burns et al. n.d). By reinstating boundaries between the performer and their character, these practices encourage a clear separation between professional practice and personal well-being.

Care and Community

Although our interviewees recognized the realities of competition for work in a largely freelance industry, the emphasis on community and collegiality across the interviews was striking, challenging individualist notions of creative labor. Our interviewees commonly expressed admiration for each other's practice and recommended other people to speak to. The precarious nature of film and television employment, where work is often spread across different, sometimes transnational, locales, has been identified as threatening the sociality of labor, workplace politics, and unionization (Curtin and Sanson 2017). However, many of our interviewees were actively involved in trade union activity via the Bectu Intimacy Coordinator branch, established in August 2020. As a burgeoning field, this community was identified as playing a vital role in defining the profession's parameters, pooling resources, establishing rates of pay, developing guidelines that clarify the responsibilities of productions when engaging intimacy coordinators, and discussing best practice (see Bectu 2022). Hunt reflected:

> With a role that's so individual and solitary and people being like, 'We don't really know what other people's experiences are, and how much money everyone's getting, and how people are being treated,' to come together in a union, to be able to standardize things, and just talk to each other, has been really helpful.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

While informality has been connected to carelessness in the industry, these informal networks of care between intimacy coordinators themselves are crucial in sustaining the profession, challenging feelings of isolation, and providing mutual support. This community is not to be underestimated in a freelance context in which there is little formal support in place for intimacy coordinators. Indeed, one question that we were left with following our interviews is who cares for intimacy coordinators when they're looking after so many others.

Several people spoke enthusiastically about opportunities to collaborate with other intimacy coordinators on productions, and there was clear passion for the social aspects of their work, which involves building and maintaining close professional relationships with casts and crew. Our interviewees also often acknowledged departments that pre-date the profession, such as costume, hair and make-up, that have historically provided vital care on productions, though without adequate recognition or remuneration. In turn, they advocated for the importance of newer roles, such as well-being practitioners and specialist consultants, in instilling holistic processes of care on set. This community aspect of the profession has been largely ignored in mainstream media coverage of intimacy coordination.

Care for colleagues extended to actors in training. Many of our interviewees expressed deep commitments to developing intimacy practice in drama schools and educational settings to empower young and/or less experienced actors. As Waldrop explained,

> That's when they're most vulnerable, when they have just emerged into the industry. Yes, it's something that I'm very proud of that so many members of our community care about and spend their time. . . it's certainly a fundamental part of how I conceive of my work in this field.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

Two of our interviewees have since developed guidelines for best intimacy practice in Higher Education (Rickman and Hunt 2023). A recurring interview theme was the need to change the way actors are taught in drama school, which often prioritizes saying "yes" much more than "no". Some participants framed teaching young students to express their boundaries as a form of activism. There was also a recurring emphasis on educating wider casts and crews to expand understandings of what intimacy entails, and how to work with boundaries, as well as a willingness from intimacy coordinators themselves to continually learn and develop their practice.

Our interviewees also frequently advocated for the diversification of the intimacy coordinator profession, which is currently dominated by white, cisgender, middle-class women. Some are actively involved in initiatives to expand opportunities to underrepresented groups, challenging the media industry's tendency toward homophily (see Snow 2021). Diversifying the profession was deemed vital, yet there was recognition that this diversification needs to happen at a much wider level beyond this one role.

The Limits of Care

While the employment of intimacy coordinators suggests wider industry investment in supporting workers' well-being and fostering safer sets, our interviewees spoke of navigating working environments that were not consistently set up to support their practice. For example, interviewees commonly made a distinction between ideal scenarios in which they are given ample time and space to work with cast and crew from

the pre-production stage onward, and real-life scenarios where the processes of care they enact are impeded by tight time and financial constraints, and where they might be on set for just one day. As Talbot explained,

> The time pressure in TV and film is obviously much greater because it costs more money per minute to shoot. So, completing the day is of great importance but coupled with that you've got the complication of, you know, urgency as a form of coercion: 'Come on, we've only got five more minutes, let's go, let's go, let's go, hurry up, hurry up, you know, this costs so much money blah blah blah.' So, managing that is a slightly different skill.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

The industry was described at times as reactive rather than proactive when it comes to implementing processes of care. Coffey noted, "there's the reality and there's the ideal. The reality is quite often we're brought in at the last minute or if something has gone wrong" (Interview with Authors, 2021).

The industry's often reactive approach to safety on set is echoed in the frequent framing of intimacy coordinators as the answer to #MeToo in mainstream media articles, both of which obscure the need for systemic and structural change. Hunt observed that, "sometimes articles are good, but sometimes they're framed as 'The intimacy coordinators who are stopping #MeToo,' which leads to people thinking 'Thank goodness there's someone to stand in the corner and keep an eye on all the men in the room'" (Interview with Authors, 2021). An emphasis on policing and surveillance has been identified as antithetical to care (Care Collective 2020, 16). Framing intimacy coordination in this way ultimately heightens pressure on intimacy coordinators, setting them up for an impossible task, overlooking the collaborative and skillful nature of their work, and reinforcing essentialist gender binaries.

Notably, Tronto distinguishes between care and protection, explaining that "caring seems to involve taking the concerns and the needs for the other as the basis for action. Protection presumes the bad intentions and harm that the other is likely to bring to bear against the self or group, and to require a response to that potential harm" (Tronto 1993, 105). When care is conflated with protection, it presupposes a response, in turn limiting its more radical potential to be attentive to others' needs as a starting point for meaningful action. As Aust asserts, the way in which care is defined in the television industry reveals much about "how care is lacking; in the current terms, it means not being abused and not being excluded because of race, gender, (dis)ability or sexuality. These are defensive, not active measures while the way(s) in which care could be enacted remain undescribed" (Aust 2021, 120). This defensive response serves the interests of those in power, by maintaining the status quo, devolving care labor onto others, and ultimately letting the industry off the hook for previous unethical and abusive working conditions.

Further, intimacy coordinators sit relatively low down within production hierarchies. They are there to support a director's vision, and it is vital that those relationships are sensitively and carefully negotiated. While our interviewees didn't consistently see hierarchical set relationships as impeding their work, they recognized

that their ability to embed processes of care was shaped by others' willingness to work with them. As the profession becomes more established, our interviewees identified a growing appreciation of the role by others on set, yet some—particularly intimacy coordinators who were younger, less experienced and/or from marginalized groups—recounted moments of resistance which were connected to entrenched industry traditions and often highly gendered and racialized power dynamics.

Conclusions: Looking to the Future

In highlighting the processes of care enacted by intimacy coordinators, this article responds to growing calls to foreground care in discussions of creative labor. As feminist scholars have noted, the devaluation of care is connected to its association with women. There's a danger then in positioning the labor of intimacy coordination—a female-dominated profession—as a form of care work in terms of reinforcing essentialist understandings of gender and gender roles that contribute to wider inequities in the media industries and operate to obscure the skilled nature of this labor. Instead, we argue for the importance of properly valuing care when re-imagining what a fairer, more equitable industry might look like. Exploring intimacy practice through an ethics of care framework enables a deeper understanding of the precise processes and motivations of intimacy coordinators along with the role's wider significance in implementing practices of care on set.

The profession's rapid growth and visibility in recent years can be seen as evidence of increasing awareness of the need to prioritize workers' safety and well-being. Yet, as Sanson (2024) cautions, the industry's employment of new roles can also be seen as a "risk-management" response that is not necessarily accompanied by "structural adjustment that might facilitate sustainable change" (p. 184). Indeed, the care that intimacy coordinators instill on set is often the result of self-governing individuals who work in-between and around industry structures that do not always support their practice.

We maintain that intimacy coordination holds great potential to create meaningful change in the industry, by emphasizing the importance of communication, normalizing discussions of consent, and prioritizing workers' welfare throughout the production of intimate content. Yet, to create structural and sustainable reform, embedding processes of care needs to be a collective endeavor rather than the responsibility of just one role. Crucially, our interviewees resisted an individualist framing of their profession, instead insisting on its collaborative and community dimensions. Referring to media labor more widely, Curtin and Sanson (2017) note that "the commitment to craftwork and collaboration not only provides solace for trying times but may also provide the means to imagine and instigate alternatives for the future" (p. 8). Reflecting on hopes for the future of the profession, Talbot noted,

> The widespread advocacy needs to rise, and then everyone's safer. Whereas if it's seen as the intimacy coordinator charging in and being like, 'Hello, the advocate's here', we've failed, that's wrong. The standards need to rise as a whole.
>
> (Interview with Authors, 2021)

This change needs to be driven by a genuine commitment to improve workers' well-being, which is often perceived as in tension with the industry's profit-driven nature. In this article, we frame intimacy coordinators as a community of practitioners, working together to develop ethical protocols to prioritize care for the well-being of cast and crew during the production of intimate content. There is much to be learnt from this emergent role, and our hope, however utopian, is that intimacy coordination's call to action will be heard, and acted on, to generate new and better forms of care in television's industrial processes.

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Notes

1. Our interviewees include Tigger Blaize, Vanessa Coffey, Yarit Dor, Katharine Hardman, Robbie Taylor Hunt, Asha Jennings-Grant, Elle McAlpine, Pia Rickman, Lizzy Talbot, David Thackeray, Adelaide Waldrop and Jennifer Ward-Lealand. All provided written consent to be named in the research. Those directly quoted were provided with an article draft for review.
2. While our interviews took place in the UK, many of our interviewees work transnationally, and their insights have wider implications which are not strictly bound to any one national context.

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