

# ACADEMIC ADVISING AND *ETHIC OF CARE*: ENABLING BELONGING TO ENHANCE HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' PROSPECTS OF SUCCESS

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## ABSTRACT

The South African (SA) higher education sector continues to battle high attrition rates. Helping students gain a sense of belonging while at university and creating an environment where students feel cared for can enhance their prospects of success. Academic advising is a high-impact practice with the potential to enhance student belonging and success. This article proposes intentionally linking Tronto's *Ethic of Care (EoC)* and academic advising for SA higher education contexts. The author argues that the dimensions of Tronto's *EoC* (*attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness*) are relevant to the work of SA advisors. These dimensions are used as a framework for analysing interview data collected from 15 academic advisors from one university. The findings suggest that elements of Tronto's *EoC* are present in the advisors' work, though not explicitly. The author argues that integrating *EoC* and advising more intentionally in SA higher education contexts, could enable a greater sense of belonging for students.

**Keywords:** academic advising, belonging, care, caring, ethic of care, higher education, South Africa, student advising, student success

## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly massified higher education landscape (Pym, Goodman, and Patsika 2011; Hornsby and Osman 2014; Albertyn, Machika, and Troskie-de Bruin 2016), students can often feel isolated and lonely (Pym et al. 2011, 36; Burd 2018), which in turn may contribute to student attrition (Walsh, Larsen, and Parry 2009; O'Keeffe 2013). In South Africa, where the majority of students are first-generation students (Vincent and Hlatshwayo 2018; Motsabi, Diale, and Van Zyl 2020) that tend to enter tertiary studies from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, the sense of isolation or unbelonging can be compounded. Many students move far away from homes in rural areas to higher education institutions (HEIs) located in urban

areas, thus inevitably distancing themselves from established family and/or peer support networks (Motsabi et al. 2020), which can be alienating and isolating. Unfortunately, students who feel like they do not belong at a higher education institution (HEI) once they have commenced with their studies, are more likely to drop out than those who have fostered a sense of belonging (O’Keeffe 2013), or who have integrated successfully at the institution (Moodley and Singh 2015).

In a country like South Africa, where the higher education sector continues to battle the scourge of high attrition and low throughput rates (Letseka and Maile 2008; Lourens 2020), creating an environment where students feel that they belong is therefore imperative. To this point, studies like those by Masika and Jones (2016), Thomas (2016), and Strayhorn (2019) make explicit links between belonging and the positive impact it can have on student success. Students who feel like they belong and are cared for are more likely to feel recognised and accepted (Strayhorn 2018). Similarly, Carter et al. (2018) makes a clear connection between care and student belonging, as well as the importance thereof in helping students build their identity as a university student.

In this article, I propose the use of academic advising, underpinned by an *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005), as a means of enabling a sense of belonging for students studying at South African HEIs, with the aim of enhancing student success. I argue that by intentionally integrating care into academic advising within South African HEI contexts, advisors could play an important part in helping students feel recognised and accepted, thus enabling a sense of student identity and belonging.

## **ACADEMIC ADVISING**

While academic advising has been part of higher education globally for decades (see for example: Clark 1989; Beatty 1991; Aune 2000; Tuttle 2000; Zhang and Dinh 2017; Mann 2020), its emergence within the South African higher education sector is still nascent (Obaje and Jeawon 2021, 18; Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021, 5). In fact, Tiroyabone and Strydom (2021, 5) posit the earliest direct reference to academic advising in South Africa was made as recently as 2010, although I have found that Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela (2009, 17) mentioned it fleetingly in relation to South African teaching development grants the year before. Nonetheless, academic advising remains a proven high-impact practice (Moodley and Singh 2015, 95; Strydom and Loots 2020) with the potential to have a significant influence on students’ sense of belonging and chances of success at their HEI.

Nutt (2003, 1) explains that academic advisors “... offer students the personal connection to the institution that [...] is vital to student retention and student success.” Therefore, the

position of academic advisors as a central point of contact among students, support services across the HEI, and the academic divisions/departments in a faculty (de Klerk 2021, 103), affords advisors a unique opportunity to build relationships with students that can help them (students) feel like they belong. Strayhorn (2015, 62) makes this link between academic advisors and student belonging explicit when he says:

“[t]hey help students navigate college by making clear what students need to know and do to be successful. They help students find a sense of belonging on campus.”

This beckons the question, what is belonging within higher education contexts and why is it important?

## **BELONGING**

Evidence supporting the link between student success and belonging has increased over the last decade (O’Keeffe 2013; Thomas 2016; Masika and Jones 2016; Meehan and Howells 2019). Strayhorn (2018, 4) offers a working definition of belonging for higher education contexts that will serve to guide usage of the concept in this article:

“In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers.”

Two things stand out in this definition: i) the social dimension of students’ higher education experience; and ii) the link between belonging and care.

### **Social integration**

The literature shows that there is a clear link between students’ social integration at a HEI and their prospects of academic success (Motsabi et al. 2020). Yeager et al. (2016, E3342) found that interventions aimed at enhancing the way disadvantaged students perceived themselves within the context of the HEI (which by extension improved their sense of social belonging), had a significant and positive impact on their academic performance. Although that study was conducted in the United States of America, one of the defining characteristics of *disadvantaged students* as per Yeager et al. (2016, E3342) was their first-generation status; a prevalent characteristic of South African higher education students (Vincent and Hlatshwayo 2018; Motsabi et al. 2020). In turn, Meehan and Howells (2019, 1377) (in their United-Kingdom-based study) found that students’ feelings of isolation and fear decreased when they felt part of

communities (e.g., social communities and learning communities) at their HEI. Other studies evidence similar links between students' sense of belonging and social integration at their HEI (see, for example: Ahn and Davis 2020a; 2020b; Pym et al. 2011; Strayhorn 2018). Strayhorn (2018, 4), in particular, makes an important link between the sense of belonging individuals gain from groups/communities on campus and the care and support such groups/communities offer the individual. Thus, in as much as there is a link between social integration and belonging, there is also a close relationship between caring and belonging.

## **Caring**

The notion of care or caring arises often in the literature about student belonging within higher education contexts, and about enabling positive learning experiences for higher education students (Graham-Smith and Lafayette 2004; O'Keeffe 2013; Anderson et al. 2020; Khanna, Jacob, and Chopra 2021). Strayhorn's (2018, 4) definition of belonging, as shared above, incorporates the notion of care as an important part of helping students foster a sense of belonging on campus. Concomitantly, O'Keeffe (2013, 607) explicates that higher education environments that are supportive, caring, and welcoming, are crucial to helping students feel like they belong. Furthermore, authors like Noddings (1988; 2012) and Freire (2005) has made substantive contributions to the literature about caring (Freire equates caring with love), but their work focuses predominantly on pedagogy and practice in relation to classroom teaching. In this article, the focus includes but moves beyond students' classroom learning experience, to the more holistic experience of being a university student. Important to mention here, is that through Tronto's feminist and philosophical lenses, care as a concept may be perceived as problematic within the higher education context.

Anderson et al. (2020, 2) explain that some would argue incorporating care (or love) within higher education contexts (and particularly the classroom) subverts an established separation of private and public life (see, for example: Tronto 1993; hooks 1994, 198). While these arguments are imperative to transformative higher education and must be grappled with for the betterment of society, in this article I approach the notion of care and how it is practiced within higher education contexts in a distinctly pragmatic way. As shown, there is a growing body of literature that supports the importance of care in higher education contexts (whether philosophically or practically), both to enhance students' learning experience and to help them foster a sense of belonging that serves to counteract attrition. It is through this practical lens that I introduce Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care*.

## TRONTO'S *ETHIC OF CARE*

Having established a close link between student belonging and caring, and the potential of academic advising as a conduit for helping students foster a sense of belonging at their HEI, the next imperative is to link advising and caring. To achieve this, I propose the integration of Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care* with academic advising. Two colleagues and I have proposed elsewhere that Tronto's (2005) work on *Ethic of Care* could be used to guide the selection of academic advisors for advisor posts within the South African higher education sector (article under review). In this article, I build on that premise by using Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care* as a framework with which to analyse data collected during interviews with practicing academic advisors, to establish a link between academic advising and *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005).

While several scholars have contributed to the literature on *Ethic of Care* (see for example: Baier 1995; Gilligan 1993; Noddings 1988; 2012), Jane Tronto's (2005) framing thereof is used as the theoretical basis for this article. Tronto's body of work falls largely in the domains of philosophical and feminist theory, which is what underpins her notion of *Ethic of Care*. As mentioned earlier, this article adopts a more pragmatic approach when linking *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005) and academic advising. This pragmatic approach does not serve to subvert or diminish Tronto's work in any way, but rather allows the author to draw on her work outside the moral and political contexts within which she proposes it (Tronto 2005, 251). Consequently, the four dimensions Tronto (2005) provides are proposed as four key elements that could underpin academic advising practice within the South African higher education context. These dimensions are *attentiveness*, *responsibility*, *competence*, and *responsiveness* (Tronto 2005).

The first dimension, *attentiveness*, requires a need for care to be recognised, else care would not be possible (Tronto 2005, 252). The second dimension, *responsibility*, arises when the carer recognises the need for care and takes the duty of caring upon themselves (Tronto 2005, 253). The third dimension, *competence*, requires the caregiver to be capable (in a variety of ways) to care for the care-receiver (Tronto 2005, 254). The fourth and final dimension of Tronto's *Ethic of Care* is *responsiveness*, which signals the requirement that care-receivers be responsive to the care being provided in order for the care to be effective (Tronto 2005, 255). These four dimensions encapsulates Tronto's (2005) conceptualisation of *Ethic of Care*.

My central argument in this article is that caring, and, in particular, elements of Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care*, are already present in the work of the advisors who contributed to this study. In making this link between academic advising at a South African HEI and *Ethic of Care* (2005) explicit, I argue for a more deliberate integration of *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005); both in the way advising is practiced and how advisor professional learning occurs. By conscientizing both academic advisors and their managers to the presence of *Ethic of Care*

(Tronto 2005) in the advising work being done, care could be designed into academic advising more intentionally and systematically, which in turn could help enable a greater sense of belonging for the students these advisors work with.

## **METHODOLOGY AND DATA**

This qualitative study adopts a phenomenological research design (Groenewald 2004; Fisher and Stenner 2011; Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie 2015), which afforded the author opportunities to explore and make meaning of (Groenewald 2004) the phenomenon being studied; in this case, academic advising and care.

The exploration is done by using Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care* to analyse interview data, which was collected through semi-structured interviews with practicing academic advisors at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). At the time of the interviews, there were 15 academic advisors employed at Wits, which is where the author is employed and where the study was located. The study was approved by the author's institutional research ethics committee (Protocol Number: H20/04/06). All of the advisors were invited to participate in this study voluntarily, agreed to do so, and gave informed consent, prior to the interviews being conducted.

Semi-structured, open-ended questions were posed to advisors to allow for some freedom of response and to afford opportunities for the interviewer to probe any novel observations that emerged (Mabry 2008, 218). Interviews took place online over the course of one month, after which interview recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber, coded, and analysed. The author adopted an iterative, deductive approach to code and analyse data (Bertram and Christiansen 2014, 133), using the dimensions of Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care* as lenses with which to achieve this. This allowed the author to identify the dimensions of Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care* already encapsulated in the work of the advisors who participated in this study.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In this section I draw on a series of short narratives from my interviews with the academic advisors who participated in the study, to support my assertion that elements of care are already encapsulated in their work. This approach to presenting and engaging with the data affords unique insights into the work of advisors more generally. Naturally, the narratives selected are mere samples, with many more narratives from the interviews not included here. Nevertheless, the extracted quotes and findings shared in this section are representative of all interviewees, with elements of care (as presented in this article) encapsulated in the data collected from all 15 advisors.

Readers will observe that in some instances, the *Ethic of Care* dimensions (Tronto 2005) emerge quite clearly, while in others they tie to the notion of care more loosely, yet still contribute in important ways to the argument I build throughout the article. Moreover, not every dimension of Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care* is discussed in relation to each narrative shared. Rather, some narratives are used to exemplify specific dimensions of *Ethic of Care*, and how this links to the work of academic advisors and to the fostering of a sense of belonging for students. Before engaging with these narratives though, it is important to consider the way in which one *Ethic of Care* dimension (Tronto 2005), that of *competence*, is positioned in relation to academic advising.

The question of advisor *competence* remains somewhat ambiguous. All the academic advisors who participated in this study were, presumably, appointed to their roles following a competitive interview process, which is standard practice at the institution. Consequently, one assumes a panel of their peers and superiors found them competent to do the work they are employed to do. However, while there are measures in place nationally for academic advisor professional training through the University of the Free State (Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021, 5) that most (if not all) of the advisors interviewed has completed, Wits (the institution where these advisors work) and/or advisor managers should develop continuous measures to ensure ongoing advisor *competence*. Once-off training is necessary, but continuous professional learning and review processes are essential. This should serve to ensure continuous advisor *competence*, while at the same time affording opportunities for implementing measures for determining whether the care provided has been successful. This consideration is important, as Tronto (2005, 254) emphasises that failing to provide good care, means the caring has been unsuccessful. However, for the purpose of this article, I work on the assumption that all participating advisors possess the *competence* to work as professional academic advisors, and that this dimension of *Ethic of Care* is present throughout. What follows are six advisor narratives.

### **Advisor narrative 1**

“... with regards to the first years, they come into university and most of them, [...] particularly those that are coming from poor backgrounds, [...] find themselves just out of place ....” [...] “Some of them really cannot communicate because they feel like their English is not good enough. So, as soon as I am able to come in contact with them, I’m able to just share, because I think also because of my background, I’m able to really connect with those kinds of students; [...] share my experiences when I came into university, because I was also – I felt a little bit out of place when I came to university.” (Interviewee 1).

Here we observe Interviewee 1 being *attentive* to the needs of first-year students, by recognising the fact that they feel out of place, i.e., like they do not belong. Interviewee 1 perceives this as a need by first years from poor backgrounds in particular. She then shows a sense of *responsibility* to care, drawing on her own experience of coming to university, in an attempt to help these students find a greater sense of belonging. It is worth noting here that the practice of drawing on experience is something the interviews showed is central to the way in which academic advising is practiced at Wits. The first two dimensions of Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care* emerges quite plainly from this advisor narrative, yet the fourth dimension (*responsiveness*) is not as easily identifiable, which may signal a limitation of this study, as student voices have not been included.

In relation to Advisor Narrative 1, the students the academic advisor engages with must be *responsive* to the care provided, for that care to be effective. If the advisor makes recommendations about what students could do that will help them integrate at the institution, but the students then fails to act on those recommendations, the care provided becomes futile. To mitigate this outcome, advisors should be taught ways to close the advising loop, by arranging follow-up engagements with students where they can assess whether they (students) have been *responsive* to the advisor's advice. This could have the associated benefit of strengthening the relationship between advisor and advisee, thus potentially fostering a greater sense of belonging for the student. Additionally, the institution should develop and implement ways of tracking students' interactions with various support services across the institution, to form an increasingly more comprehensive picture of the student and whether they are being *responsive* to the care that is being provided; both by advisors and from other areas. Succeeding in this regard has the potential to use academic advising as a means of enhancing students' integration at the institution and, by extension, their sense of belonging.

## Advisor narrative 2

"... there are some students who feel that it's a weakness to be seeking for information. It shows that they, I do not know [...] they feel like there is something wrong with them if they are asking for information. And you know that is not true, but there are some students who feel, or maybe they think we expect them to be knowing [sic] everything and be comfortable with everything and be confident everywhere. It might be [...] what they think we expect of them, and those students will not come through [for academic advising]. And I also want to think there is peer pressure involved. If my friends are going to this unit for one, two, three, four, [...] then I'm also going to go. But if my friends are not going there ... They [students] have that sense of belonging, you know, when they are at that age and they are still trying to find their feet, so it depends on what the common group is doing. If the others are doing it, then I am also doing it. If the others are not, then I am not doing it." (Interviewee 2).



The narrative by Interviewee 2 foregrounds two of Tronto's (2005) *Ethic of Care* dimensions, while also touching on the importance of social integration and peers in relation to student belonging. From the narrative, one observes the academic advisor drawing on her experience as an advisor to recognise the need for students to be taught how to seek advice or help. In other words, she is being *attentive* to an observed student need. Yet *attentiveness* is futile without the *responsiveness* dimension, which Tronto (2005) explains is essential to care being effective. If the care-receiver is not *responsive* to the care being provided, that care becomes worthless. A colleague and I have argued elsewhere that academic advisors are positioned to help address broader challenges pertaining to student help-seeking behaviour (article forthcoming), which emerged from these interviews as being problematic. Addressing this is imperative, should an *Ethic of Care* approach be integrated more formally with academic advising, as poor help-seeking behaviour among students presents the risk of care being ineffective and may negatively impact on students' social integration at the HEI and, by association, their sense of belonging.

Interviewee 2 also introduces the notion of peers and makes an important connection between a student, their peers, and feelings of belonging. This ties to the definition of belonging by Strayhorn (2018) introduced earlier, and in particular the social dimension thereof. In this narrative, Interviewee 2 is subliminally signalling the powerful influence peers could have on students' prospects of success. According to Interviewee 2, peers who model positive help-seeking behaviour signals to the student that reaching out for help is acceptable. Therefore, the student would not experience tensions between their need to seek help (and by extension, benefit from the care provided by an academic advisor), and their need to belong to the peer group. However, peers who do not model positive help-seeking behaviour (or even criticises the notion of help-seeking or engaging with student support structures), may inadvertently cause internal tensions for a fellow student who may feel the need to seek help, yet do not want to risk dissonance with their peers. Thus, peers may have a powerful role to play in the effectiveness of care practiced by academic advisors. This could be offset by employing peer advisors that work with academic advisors and who intentionally model and encourage help-seeking for students (Spark et al. 2017; de Klerk, Maleswena, and Spark 2022, 32-38).

### **Advisor narrative 3**

“Helping students navigate the university system. [...] So, I think about university as a maze and I think about academic advising as like a map to help guide you through the maze, to help you

navigate the system, because there really is not much of a guide. There is not much of a system that is easily and readily available. So, I think about academic advising as that map, to help you, to help guide you through the maze that is university.” (Interviewee 7).

If we extend the maze metaphor introduced with this narrative, the notion of advising acting as a map to help students navigate the maze makes for a powerful image. A student who is able to navigate the maze, would arguably be able to find their way to the middle of the maze or out of the maze, depending on what the objective is. A caring individual (i.e., an academic advisor) who builds a relationship with a student and can give advice and guidance about the maze (in this case the university), is showing care towards that student by being *attentive* to whatever aspect of maze navigation they require help with. The advisor, by the nature of their work, takes upon themselves the *responsibility* to help students navigate the university in order for them (the students) to acquire a sense of belonging. Of greatest concern once again is the *responsiveness* dimension, as it requires students to reach out or engage with advisors to be able to benefit from the care that is being provided. Failure to do so would result in the map to the maze being available, while students continue to struggle through it without help or guidance, which may contribute to feelings of isolation and negatively affect their sense of belonging.

#### **Advisor narrative 4**

“... while sometimes there might be some general truths about the advice that we give to students, [...] each student in their different circumstances [...] might require something that is tailor-made for their particular situation. And because all these situations, whether it is home background or it is [their] financial situation or it is accommodation, they all, either directly or indirectly, affect their [students'] learning. And so, understanding where they are at – being with the student or meeting them where they are at – is very helpful for me to understand what would then go on in the classroom situation. Will they [students] be thinking about food when they are supposed to be learning [...] for instance? Will they be thinking about missing the last taxi or the last bus if they were to study in the library? So, I think, all those circumstances, either directly or indirectly influence how much they are going to learn in the classroom.” (Interviewee 8).

The narrative by Interviewee 8 demonstrates the holistic nature of academic advising, as practiced within and for the realities of the South African higher education context. An *attentiveness* to the diverse needs of different students comes through in this quote, with the advisor demonstrating insight into the complexities of student life in South Africa. In other words, insights about the broader student experience that moves beyond the confines of the classroom. By proverbially placing herself in the shoes of students, this advisor reveals her nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which things like food insecurity, financial constraints, and other circumstances could have a detrimental influence on students' classroom

learning experience, and by extension, their prospects of success. Having someone who demonstrates insight of this nature and who demonstrates understanding for the complex lives of students, has the potential to make students feel cared for and that they belong to the HEI where they study.

Another *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005) dimension that emerges from the narrative is that of *responsibility*. By showing a deeper awareness of the factors that may affect students' learning experience, this academic advisor reveals a sense of *responsibility* to practice care for her students. It is worth noting that this sense of awareness about the broader student experience, being *attentive* to students' needs, and displaying feelings of *responsibility* to advise students with this awareness intact, came through quite strongly in several of the interviews. This demonstrates how *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005) may already be part of the work academic advisors do, although not necessarily explicit.

### Advisor narrative 5

“... first thing that comes to mind is obviously the importance of advising and the role it can play in the university, but also for students. I feel like advising is a link between the institution and the student and even if the information is available to students, widely, they still need a social aspect to speak to a person, you know, not a machine and I think that advising has that kind of role. I'm not talking necessarily about what we do as advisors, I'm just speaking about the actual importance of it. But on a personal level, advising to me is more of a personal calling. [...] I think it takes a specific person to be an advisor and you've got to really want to do it. So, for me [...] the word that comes to mind is passion. It's a calling.” (Interviewee 12).

The penultimate narrative used in this article highlights the social dimension of academic advising, which ties back to the earlier discussion connecting the importance of student social integration with both belonging and care (Strayhorn 2018). This academic advisor mentions how advisors are an important social link between the student and the institution, thus signalling an *attentiveness* to student needs and tying back to the social dimension of belonging. The notion of *responsibility* also comes through when the advisor describes the work she does as both a calling and a passion, which may be interpreted as implying she feels a sense of *responsibility* towards the students she works with. Additionally, and although the *competence* dimension was discussed earlier, this narrative reveals a crucial truth about academic advising work.

While anyone could, arguably, be trained to be an academic advisor, Interviewee 12 emphasises the importance of the incumbent advisor *wanting* to do the work and even says that “it takes a specific person to be an advisor”. This notion of identifying the right individuals to

appoint in academic advisor roles within the South African higher education sector is discussed more thoroughly in another paper (currently under review). Nevertheless, finding the suitable individuals to occupy academic advisor roles is essential to advising that aims to demonstrate care and help students foster a sense of belonging.

### **Advisor narrative 6**

“... I’m drawing from my personal experiences as a student and me encountering an academic advisor, how that also changed my perspective [...] First of all, understanding that there are people who care about you, who are not even your family, [...] who have an interest in your success. [...] When you come to university, sometimes you feel ‘it is all on me, I’m here to be tested, I’m in the jungle, so I have to fend for myself’. So, I feel like [...] academic advising is very much important [sic] to allow the student the privilege to know that there is someone out there who cares and [that] their [the student’s] success is important; not just to them but to the university as well.” (Interviewee 13).

In the final narrative, Interviewee 13 makes an explicit link between academic advising and care. In reflecting on their own experience as a student who encountered an academic advisor during his time at university, he observes how that interaction changed his (student) perspective and made him realise there are people (non-family members) who can care for him. In his case, he found the care in an academic advisor working at the university where he studied.

The narrative shows how this academic advisor has insight into the way university can feel like a jungle, where students have to fend for themselves. By implication, I would argue this demonstrates *attentiveness* to student needs on the part of the advisor, who emphasises the importance of showing students there are people who care about them and that they do not have to fend for themselves. By extension, I would also argue that this advisor takes the *responsibility* upon himself to practice care for the students he works with, in the same way an advisor showed him care during his own days as a student. Collectively, this notion of guiding students through the “jungle” and showing care, should have the associated benefit of helping students feel like they belong.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING IN SOUTH AFRICA**

The narratives show that elements of *Ethic of Care* as per Tronto (2005) are present in the work of these academic advisors, although not necessarily intentionally so. To allow academic advisors and the students they work with to reap full benefit from an *Ethic of Care* approach (Tronto 2005), academic advisors and their managers must be conscientized to its presence in the advising work being done already. Additionally, they must be alerted to the potential

benefits it could bring for helping students integrate socially at their HEI and feel like they belong. This could be achieved by intentionally and systematically designing *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005) into the way academic advising is practiced and the way academic advisor professional learning is done.

Designing *Ethic of Care* into advising can also serve to protect advisors, who often (so it appears) go beyond the call of duty. Tronto (2005, 254), in her discussion on *responsibility*, introduces “the notion of being overly responsible for others”, thus raising the matter of boundaries. Although not the topic of discussion here, another element that came through during these interviews was the way in which academic advisor burnout emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. It appears that academic advisors may be at risk of feeling overly responsible for the students they work with, which could contribute to advisor burnout or other boundary-related challenges. To mitigate against this, advisors and their managers could, while integrating Tronto’s (2005) *Ethic of Care* into academic advising approaches, deliberately incorporate measures to guard against advisors feeling overly responsible for their students. This may also be important to support the development of student agency and independence as they (students) progress upward through years of study, which in turn may be linked to the *responsiveness* dimension.

Finally, *responsiveness* emerges as a potentially challenging dimension, as advisors have limited-to-no control over student help-seeking behaviour. A notable limitation of this study is the absence of student voices about help-seeking, care, and their experiences of academic advising. Further studies could investigate barriers to help-seeking among South African students and ways to mitigate against it, in order to support the intentional incorporation of *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005) into the work of academic advisors and to enhance its potential efficacy.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The narratives shared here, although representing only a fraction of the rich data generated by this study, affords one a glimpse into the work of academic advisors at a South African university. The aim of this article was to show that elements of Tronto’s (2005) *Ethic of Care* were already present in the work of these advisors, though not explicitly or intentionally. This was achieved by analysing select narratives using the four dimensions of *Ethic of Care* offered by Tronto (2005): *attentiveness*, *responsibility*, *competence*, and *responsiveness*. The central argument made is that by linking care and advising, issues of student belonging may be addressed, as there is a close link between belonging and care, as gleaned from the literature and this study.

In conclusion, at a time when academic advising in and for South African higher education continues to evolve (Obaje and Jeawon 2021, 18; Tiroyabone and Strydom 2021, 5), these insights about the work of advisors and their potential for helping address sectoral challenges is crucial. Not only can advisors help clarify student support needs in unique ways because of the caring relationships they build with their students, they could also contribute meaningfully to helping students feel like they belong through an *Ethic of Care* (Tronto 2005).

## DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The author declares that he has no personal or financial interests or relationships that could have influenced this study or its findings.

The author ascribes to the highest standards of ethical conduct in all his research endeavors. This study was approved by the Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) prior to data collection (Protocol Number: H20/04/06).

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