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Academic carers performing mobile subjectivities in the neoliberal university

Type of proposal: Individual paper part of a symposium

Part 1: Abstract (150 words maximum)

Once the preserve of the White, middle-class, male and ‘unencumbered’ scholar, ‘Western’ academia has considerably diversified over the past fifty years (Maher & Tetreault, 2007). Yet academic excellence continues to be associated with the ‘bachelor boy’ (Hinton-Smith, 2012) as Cartesian dualisms still permeate academic cultures and are reactualised through gendered discourses of intensive parenting and of the managerial university (Leathwood & Read, 2009).

This paper draws on a research project funded by the LFHE, which looked at England-based academics who are also carers. Informed, on a theoretical level, by post-structuralist feminist research and, on an empirical level, by a corpus of interviews conducted with academic carers and policy staff, it argues that performing mobile academic subjectivities is fraught with tensions for carers. Specific reference is made to the role of academic mobility requirements such as conference attendance in this process.

Part 2: outline (1000 words maximum)

Once the preserve of the White, middle-class, male and ‘unencumbered’ scholar, ‘Western’ academia has considerably diversified over the past fifty years (Archer et al, 2003; Leathwood & Read, 2009; Maher & Tetreault, 2007). In particular, many students and academic staff now have some form of caring responsibilities (Carers UK, 2014; NUS, 2009, 2013). Yet academic excellence continues to be associated with the ‘bachelor boy’ (Hinton-Smith, 2012). Cartesian dualisms, which produce academic identities through a denial of emotional domestic, physical and domestic matters, still permeate academic cultures (Ahmed, 1998; Braidotti, 1991; Leathwood & Hey, 2009; AUTHOR, 2016). The physical and normative dissociation of academia and care, already ingrained in the Cartesian ideals, is also reactualised through the (gendered) discourses of the managerial university and of intensive parenting (read ‘mothering’) – two ‘greedy institutions’ which *surveillent* and command undivided loyalty and full availability from the scholar and the parent (Coser, 1974; Hays, 1996). Such a climate has led to claims that Western, contemporary, academic cultures are masculinist, ‘careless’ (Lynch, 2010; Lynch et al, 2009) or even ‘toxic’ (Gill, 2009) in nature. In this context, satisfying the mobility requirements associated with academic life, for example attending and presenting at conferences, is likely to be fraught with tensions for carers.

The paper draws on a research project funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, which considered how university policies impact on the experiences of academic staff with caring responsibilities in three English universities (AUTHOR, 2017). It involved conducting three in-depth case studies of universities, including some policy and documentation research, interviews with staff in a HR or equality roles, and interviews with academic staff with a range of caring responsibilities. This generated a significant body of data regarding the experiences of staff carers in English Higher Education and how these experiences are shaped

by university policies and cultures and their 'care regimes'. All interviews conducted as part of these three projects were recorded and transcribed by a professional agency and imported into a qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo). The transcripts were subjected to a thematic and discourse analysis, with key themes derived from the original research questions, from the interview questions, and from the repeated readings of the transcripts. While participants were not asked directly about conferences and other forms of academic mobility, this emerged as a recurrent theme in their narratives. In particular, interviewees often mentioned the challenges associated with attending conferences, including in relation to work-life balance and career development (see interview schedule and coding frame in AUTHOR, 2017).

While the research project as a whole adopted a broad angle to explore the relationship between care/rs and academia, this paper concentrates specifically on the mobility requirements associated being an academic and how they affect those whose own mobility is constrained by care work. Academic mobilities are polymorphous – they can be short-term or long-term, national or transnational (e.g. attending conferences and seminars, taking up visiting positions or developing collaborations, nationally and internationally). Mobility requirements also vary considerably across subject cultures. However, the globalisation of the academic labour market and of knowledge production has intensified mobility requirements for this group, and 'mobility has become an important criterion for evaluating academic careers' (Kim, 2017: in press). Interviews conducted with academic carers highlight how the spatio-temporal regimes of academia are little compatible with those of care work. Many participants in the study talked of the difficulties they faced in attending seminars and conferences, either because their timing was not care-friendly (as in the case of evening seminars) or because it involved staying away from home overnight. For those who occupy a sole or main carer position (usually women), these requirements were sometimes simply out of reach. Negotiating the conflicting demands of both institutions is fraught with tensions for this group, whose members struggle to meet the expectations of the global, mobile, independent academic worker. As a result, they risk being marginalised or even excluded from academia.

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