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Academic Mothers and the Practice of Embodied Care: Navigating and Resisting Uncaring Structures in the Neoliberal Academy

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Abstract

Purpose

Recent research has captured the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in widening gender inequalities, by highlighting academic women have been disproportionately affected. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women assumed most of the care labour at home, whilst working usual or even increased patterns, leaving them unable to perform as normal. This is very concerning because of the short and long-term detrimental consequences this will have on women's well-being and their academic careers. In this article, we aim to stimulate a change in the current understandings of academic work by pointing towards alternative –and more inclusive – ways of working in academia.

Design/methodology/approach

The two authors engage with autoethnography and draw on their own personal experience of becoming breastfeeding academic mothers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

To understand the positioning of contemporary academic mothers, we draw on insights from both cultural studies and organisation studies on the emergence of discursive formations about gender, i.e., 'postfeminist sensibility'. Guided by our autoethnographic accounts of academic motherhood, we reveal that today academia creates an *individualised, neutral (disembodied), output-focused and control-oriented* understanding of academic work.

Originality/value

This paper adds to the conversation of academic motherhood and the impact of the pandemic on working mothers. We do so by theoretically contributing with the lens of ‘motherhood’ in grasping what academic work can become. We show the power of motherhood in opening up an alternative way of conceptualising academic work, centred on embodied care, and appreciative of the non-linearity and messiness of life.

Keywords: Motherhood; Academia; Postfeminism; Ethics of care; Bodies

1. Introduction

Despite more women working than ever before (WEF, 2022), inequalities linked to gendered divisions of labour, and specifically care responsibilities continue to persist (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Mason and Goulden, 2004; Mason et al., 2013; Pecis et al, 2022; Wolfinger et al., 2008). The context of the COVID-19 pandemic has reinvigorated these discussions and has brought even more to the fore questions and issues related to both professional and personal spheres. Within the context of higher education, research that addresses gender inequalities vis-à-vis the pandemic has recently flourished (Almansori and Hillier, 2020; Minello et al., 2021; Pereira, 2021). These works have demonstrated that women have been disproportionately affected during the pandemic, notably in terms of their ability to do research and remain ‘productive’ at work (Manzo and Minello 2020; Martucci et al. 2022; Martucci, 2023; Minello, 2020; Minello et al., 2021). During the pandemic, women have tended to assume most of the care labour at home (Minello et al, 2021; ONS, 2020), as they also worked, leaving them unable to work and perform as normal (Miller and Riley, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). This is very concerning because of the short and long-term detrimental consequences not only on women’s academic careers, but also in advancing women’s hard-won achievements (see Pecis et al, 2022 for an illustration). Various contributions in the literature have sought to highlight the gender inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic and to offer some suggestions as to what practical approaches may be adopted in order to redress the situation (e.g. Fulweiler et al., 2021).

As women in the UK academic context who have recently become mothers, we are enthused by the energy that has been generated around these questions and the attempts, especially by fellow women academics, to drive change within and across the confines of our institutions. These efforts must be celebrated. We feel however that it is critical to engage in further reflections regarding the way forward, especially to expose the underlying assumptions on the meaning of motherhood and on academic work (Pereira, 2021). Paying attention to the political and power dynamics at play can help illuminate how experiences of being mother and academic are shaped at multiple levels, and what forms resistance takes in this context. We must be careful not to reproduce and impose narrow and problematic conceptualisations of academic motherhood/ing if we are to identify pathways for thriving and flourishing. In this paper, we take the shocks generated by the COVID-19 pandemic to further reflect on the current state of academia. We see this as an opportunity to rethink academic work more broadly and challenge existing power structures by centring on *care as resistance*.

In what follows, we problematise how academic work is understood and performed. We unveil the patriarchal assumptions underpinning it, namely that a) academic work is associated with performance and productivity in a way that neutralises the body; b) it creates a space for rational thought that marginalises love and emotions; c) it emphasises individualised measurable outputs over processes, and in so doing masks the reality of the labour. To address these patriarchal assumptions, we use the lens of ‘motherhood’ to show its power in opening up an alternative way of conceptualising academic work, centring on embodied care, and appreciating the non-linearity and messiness of life.

We provide windows into our own experiences as academic mothers and as such are able to render palatable at the micro-level of experience where ‘the effects of power are felt’ (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 684). This work constitutes our attempt to find ‘wholeness’ as academic mothers as proposed by Pillay (2009); but more certainly it represents a way of ‘acting otherwise’ in our domain of work and hence as a form resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016; Mumby, 2005), which we hope will help stimulate change.

2. Conceptualising academic motherhood: theoretical foundations

2.1. A postfeminist regime

To understand the positioning of contemporary academic mothers in the worlds of work and home, we draw on insights from both cultural studies and organisation studies on the emergence of discursive formations about gender, termed ‘postfeminist sensibility’ (McRobbie, 2004). Understanding how a postfeminist sensibility operates to construct the ways women (and men) should interact, relate to each other, to the family and work is key for capturing how mothers articulate, experience and justify existing forms of sexism.

A postfeminist sensibility describes the remaking of gendered relations in contemporary cultural discourse (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004, 2009). The term itself is contested (Adamson and Kelan, 2019) because it embeds both feminist values - of freedom of choice, self-determination and equality of opportunities in patriarchal relations (Gill, 2007; Liu, 2019; Pecis and Priola, 2019), and antifeminist ideas, such as the reinforcement of the traditional family and traditional roles within the family (Gill, 2014; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2004). Postfeminist discourses emphasise an ideal of the contemporary woman as empowered, able to self-transform and self-discipline (Adamson, 2017). This resonates with accounts of academic mothers who are exhorted to perform both as caring mothers and as successful researchers (Minello et al, 2020). As such, the ideal mother can obtain both her career goals and self-fulfilment in the private sphere, if she wanted. In advocating empowerment, individualism, choice and self-discipline, postfeminist discourses see women as active agents of their own destiny (Gill, 2007). Images of the ‘empowered working girl’ (McRobbie, 2009), or empowered academic mother (Miller and Riley, 2020) dedicated to work (Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015), are dominant in this narrative: a girl with career aspirations, who maintains her feminine behaviour and desires -within a heterosexual matrix (Gill and Scharff, 2011). We see here a move away from previous feminist advances, and a return to discourses that rely on a gender binary and ‘natural’ sexual differences (Liu, 2019).

A postfeminist sensibility has been deemed dangerous for several reasons (e.g., Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017, among others). First, it individualises responsibility, hence making collective action no longer needed. This contributes to the ongoing demands placed on women as successful workers. The possibility to achieve both a successful career and maintain a woman’s (traditional) feminine conduct is an individual responsibility of a woman (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Gill, 2017a). In other words, success and failure are all in her hands. In so doing, such discourse “[depoliticizes] many of the fundamental issues advanced by [...] feminism” (Rosenfelt and Stacey, 1987:78). Not only, such individualisation is underpinned by neoliberal terms of the entrepreneurial project (Gill and Orgad, 2015) that goes hand in hand with the neoliberal spirit of current UK academia (Burton, 2018; Gill, 2017b). The seductive idea of the balanced woman turns a blind eye on structural inequalities, namely, histories of oppression and systems of power (Liu, 2019; Orgad, 2019) that continue to position some femininities as subaltern, and that place academic mothers as disadvantaged (Ahmad, 2017; Minello et al., 2021; Myers et al., 2020; Oleschuk, 2020)

Whilst organisation studies literature on the postfeminist discourse has emphasised the variety of femininities at work, and how they are differently valued (Lewis, 2010, 2012, 2014), scant attention has been given to how a postfeminist sensibility remakes the contemporary working mother,

especially within the neoliberal academic context. Recently, cultural analysis of parenting has highlighted how family and parenting are positioned as an individual responsibility, and as a problem to be addressed (Orgad and Gill, 2021). In other words, being a good parent, and guaranteeing her children's success in society, is a mother's duty. Such pressure has increased throughout the pandemic (Bahn et al., 2020), with women being forced to take on more caring obligations than men (Clark et al., 2021; Reichelt et al., 2021), and particularly so in academia (Deryugina et al., 2021; Guy and Arthur, 2020; Minello et al., 2021; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2021). Not only, women have also been exhorted to self-regulate and police themselves in their feelings and behaviours through images that fuel unreachable expectations of 'managing it all' on social media (Orgad and Gill, 2021). This has been particularly relevant during the pandemic period, where, as we will see in this paper, images of working mothers (holding their babies whilst working from home) have proliferated on social media.

The self-disciplining of mothers goes beyond the realm of parenting; mothers are asked to regulate their own body: by being empowered, they need to accept and love their transformed bodies. The solution to a lack of confidence in their bodies is located in women's psyches and behaviours, which in turn affect their children's confidence (and acceptance of their bodies, especially those of young girls). Mothers are thus asked to carry the double burden of self-disciplining their bodies and the emotions around them, as well as projecting a positive (self-confident) image of themselves as a powerful example to their children (Orgad and Gill, 2021). This leaves fathers, co-parents and relevant others outside of such responsibility, contributing to the reproduction of unbalanced gendered relations. As such, it seems that two different logics are at play, positioned in contrasting view: motherhood/parenting on the one hand and (academic) work on the other, both demanding a mutually exclusive presence.

2.2. Mothers in academia

A significant strand of research on academia and motherhood situates itself around questions related to family-work balance and has extensively focused on the idea of the divide between the two seemingly unreconcilable selves of *the academic* and *the mother* (Huopalaainen and Satama, 2019). This apparent incompatibility has been explored in several ways, including examining how motherhood affects women's performance on traditional academic KPIs and measures, e.g., comparing female vs. male scholars differential in achievements (such as research achievements, see Minello et al, 2021). Concepts such as the 'leaky pipeline' used in reference to the observed phenomenon of diminishing proportions of women at later academic career stages is emblematic of this kind of research (Fotaki, 2013; McCutcheon and Morrison, 2016). Attention has also been placed on how mothers navigate the requirements of the spheres of academic work and home (Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015).

Interestingly, while much of the research on academic work and motherhood echoes research that has considered other forms of work, there are some fundamental differences that also emerge. First, academia is largely perceived as an ideal space for women who want to be or are mothers, because of the apparent flexibility of the work and of the autonomy that exists (Swanson and Johnston, 2003). Arguably, this perspective focuses on a notion of academia as equating to research, which is in turn thought of in an idealised way whereby those who do research can think, write and do things *freely*. As such, it ignores the pressures that academics working at neoliberal universities increasingly face and in fact reproduces the individualistic framework of responsibilities of the neoliberal institution. The pervasiveness of this perspective however means that academia is not considered too much of a problematic terrain when it comes to engaging with radically changing institutional practices and cultures to ensure that mothers thrive in academia. When issues are raised, the emphasis is placed on how motherhood is negatively impacting individual women careers and progression, their ability to conform to and fit within discourses of the 'ideal worker' and the 'successful academic', i.e. the

inability to reconcile the all-demanding rational academic work with the all-demanding caring for children (Raddon, 2002). Such approaches inscribe themselves in postfeminist discourses whereby responsibility is individualised leaving academic mothers with the burden to make it work and balance two lives, without changing the institutional culture and norms of academia.

Second, academic work constitutes a significant part of academic women's identities (Huopainen and Satama, 2019; Swanson and Johnston, 2003), which they cannot therefore compartmentalise or reduce to simple tasks. In this sense, we see that academia is about *being* academic as much as *doing* academic work. One here can think of how one may refer to themselves in the following terms: I am a social scientist/biologist/historian, rather than say I work in the social sciences/biology/history. This in itself is critical to understanding how academic women who become mothers navigate this transition and the challenges they encounter in defining their identity as both mothers and academics.

Finally, and perhaps even more interesting, is the attempt to transgress the perspective that academic mothers need to 'return' or sustain academic performance and productivity as defined within a system that has been traditionally designed by and for male academics with no caring responsibilities and around a conceptualisation of academia as the domain of reason, rational thinking, free from passion. The essay by Pillay (2009) is notable in this space as it proposes an alternative narrative whereby academic mothers find 'completeness' in the two spheres of their lives. In other words, rather than constructing them as two domains in opposition that need to be navigated separately, the article argues that the two can enrich one another. Motherhood can enrich the experience of being academic and vice versa (Mason et al, 2013). The proposition by Pillay (2009) is attractive yet limited in that it feels that the onus is placed on the academic mother to find this sense of completeness and somehow displaces, once again, the matter into the private sphere.

2.3. Problematizing academic motherhood through an ethics of care

So what are the key questions at stake? We are told how to be contemporary working mothers and how to be academic mothers, but the central point remains: where is 'care' left? Who performs it, how and for whom? One cannot think about motherhood without care. Care also cripples through the façade that we have to put on at work; it is often automatically assigned to women, both mothers and non-mothers, and it is not valued as part of work. In a way, caring (as a practice of mothering) is left out of work (in what we argue later is a move to neutralise the mothering body), but actually it is not: mothering makes contributions to our work, in several ways. For example, mothering implies a care that goes beyond the care for the self, it is directed towards the other. It is altruistic as opposed to individualistic. In this paper, we show how such relationality can bring positive change to assumptions around academic work. To summarise, in this piece, we embrace an ethics of care in our approach and in the development of a 'motherhood' lens to rethink academia.

Care is placed at the forefront of our thinking, and we take it to signify 'an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation' (de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 90). Care is therefore a practice, and directs us not only to the emotional state of caring but to its 'material doing', which is ethical and political (de la Bellacasa, 2011; Martin et al., 2015). Caring is also relational – it happens in the context of relationships to human and more-than-human others (Miller, 2020). Conceptualising academic 'motherhood' through an ethics of care therefore enables foregrounding the practice of caring and its implications in terms of power and agency for those who care and are cared for. Whilst labours of care remain largely de/undervalued, in this piece we do not question that and do not necessarily wish to provide further argumentation towards this point. Instead, we ask: what happens if we take the practice of 'care', as embodied in motherhood, seriously in the context of academic work? How does it help highlight and resist limiting and oppressive 'uncaring' structures? How does it enable us to articulate a new understanding of academic work?

3. Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a genre of research and writing that “encourages a field-based researcher to engage with their own story” (Huber, 2022:4). In management and organisation studies, autoethnography has increasingly gained momentum (Bell and King, 2010; Brewis, 2005; Ford et al., 2010) for enabling the authors to make sense of their stories, especially in relation to bodily experiences at work (van Amsterdam, 2015), and the readers to empathize and understand otherwise inaccessible experiences (see for example de la Bellacasa, 2011). In other words, autoethnography allows to examine researchers’ embodied perspectives (Thanem and Knights, 2019), in a move to place the body as the medium of meaning-making (Ellis, 2004; Pelias, 1999), to reveal the materialization of culture through the body and to shape academic experiences and the development of knowledge (Mandalaki and Pérezts, 2022).

3.1 Our approach to autoethnography

By engaging with our autoethnographic accounts, we reflect upon our own past experiences as academic mothers. Because of the embodied experience of academic motherhood we reveal, the memories we chose as researchers, how we present them, and what we omit, are critical to the academic motherhood narrative (O’Shea, 2018). Our memories come through this text as we navigated –and still do– the journey of motherhood along our changing bodies, in what we see as a non-linear process of becoming an academic mother. The presentation of our stories reflects the mutual relation between the confines of a text and what we choose to present from our experiences (of breastfeeding mothers). We however hope that our experiences can talk to other marginalised bodies. Most often, autoethnographic authors write about ‘epiphanies—remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life’ (Denzin, 1989; Ellis and Bochner, 1992; Johnson, 2013). The moments that we draw upon occurred between 2019 and 2022, which mark the beginning of pregnancy and the time when we started writing this manuscript. During that period, we both held permanent research and teaching positions within business schools at two different HE institutions in the UK and experienced two important changes, the first as we became mothers and the other as we navigated through the pandemic. These times of change overlapped and shaped our personal experiences of being mothers and academics. We both documented our personal journeys during this period in different ways (journaling, taking loads of photographs, emails) and exchanged many text messages. We selected our memories based on our ongoing conversations, primarily as friends, and further along as co-authors. We do not live close to each other and like many long-distance friends, we write to each other via text messages several times a month, we have a phone call once in a while and get to meet a few times a year either at a joint conference or simply socially. We have known each other since 2010 and have established a strong friendship since then. It is thanks to our friendship that we could open a space for navigating strongly visceral issues and share our intimate concerns. When we both came back to work from our respective periods of leave, we started putting down our ongoing conversations to rationalise and process our lived experiences. As part of this process, we selected those memories that were most evocative of how motherhood and the associated practices of care were emerging through our work. As we started putting together this paper, we engaged in a process akin to data collection and analysis, which involved primarily three stages. The first stage was to reflect and write down our own individual storyline since the early days of pregnancy, map key events, interactions and moments. The second stage resembles what is often referred to as ‘sociological introspection and emotional recall’ (Johnson 2013: 108). We arranged regular calls to talk through our individual stories and gathered notes related to our physical feelings, thoughts and emotions in relation to the key moments we had identified. We adopted a conversational storytelling approach, allowing each of us to recount their story in her own words to the other. This naturally led us to the third stage, which we label as common sensemaking and analysis. Having heard each other’s memories and experiences, we proceeded to picking the ones that really stood out, notably because they were either mutual experiences even though we were different people in different places or because they were very unique. We tasked ourselves to write down vignettes that related to these key moments we had identified and shared these written vignettes,

which we read first individually and then together. This naturally iterative process led us to identify the key threads and themes of our stories including our changing bodies, the visible and invisible aspects of motherhood, navigating academic spaces and norms as mothers, the mostly unwelcome comments and advice from colleagues, our shared experiences of living away from our families, our feelings and emotions, the rigid and paradoxical institutional policies, the blurred boundaries of work and care, the way in which becoming mothers shaped our view of academia. Although there is no fixed format for autoethnographic writing, we present our stories in the form of vignettes, fragmented personal stories that “provide ‘a vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life’ (Erickson, 1986:149) that ask readers to ‘relive the experience through the writer’s or performer’s eyes’ (Denzin, 2009: 131)” (Liu, 2019:21).

3.2 Context and positionality

Our respective stories of academic motherhood intersect at different levels. We are both white European female academics living in the U.K. and have experienced academia mainly within this context. This taints our experience and makes it specific, thus setting limits of what we can speak about. Our academic roles are indefinite and involve both teaching and research, marking the pressures around both unique and different from colleagues who are on teaching/research contracts only or experience precarious work. We both became mothers in the last three years, when we were in our 30s. However, we experienced the COVID pandemic, childbirth, childcaring and breastfeeding differently as one of us gave birth before the pandemic whilst the other during the pandemic. We also took different lengths of maternity leave and made use of the (rather expensive) childcare facilities differently: whilst one of us took 11 months of leave, the other returned to work when her baby was three months old.

It is worth highlighting the context in which we find ourselves, that of the UK neoliberal university (Huppatz, Sang and Napier, 2017; Lynch, 2015). We come back to this throughout the paper given that this is the context that has informed and that we speak to when offering our reflections on re-imagining academic work through the lens of motherhood. Academic work in the UK neoliberal university is defined in ‘market terms’ (Rhodes et al., 2018), promoting notions of productivity, growth, competitiveness overlooking other values and undervaluing all dimensions of academic work that do not neatly fit within these notions, e.g. citizenship, pastoral care, etc. Paradoxically, the discourse of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) has become a feature of UK universities over the last decade, and this has been accompanied by a blossoming of sector-wide as well as institutional initiatives and policies that seemingly provide a framework for more equal and inclusive workplaces. Yet these initiatives and policies are simply another feature of the ‘hypocrisy economy’ (Paludi et al., 2023; Power, 2020), or institutional peacocking (Yarrow and Johnston, 2023), that maintain the neoliberal status quo by promoting the participation of women within the paid economy but do not address the much-needed transformative changes within the sector to alleviate structural inequalities that still place women in care work and contribute to the feminization of work.

4. Reflecting on our experiences

4.1. The neutral academic body the (in)visibility of our maternal bodies

In what follows, we draw on our experiences of becoming in/visible as breastfeeding mothers at work. We found that invisibility of the maternal body plays out into two ways of making the body neutral: by controlling it and by implicitly valuing physical presence (disregarding life circumstances).

These vignettes are our shared experiences of trying to attend an academic conference in 2022:

"I am very much looking forward to the European conference I usually attend. Since the pandemic, I have not attended it and it would be my first in-person conference since childbirth. We cross diaries and see that unfortunately my partner needs to be working in the same city of the conference but on a 9-5 basis. I turn to think about solutions, there is no childcare programme provided by my university. How am I supposed to be performing my academic role, travelling to another city without childcare provision, present at the conference and attend other relevant events? I feel like my academic performance is requiring me to leave my breastfeeding body elsewhere. Ultimately, my partner moves his work around for me."

"I am looking into university 'care funding' to try and see what I can apply for to be able to attend a well-known conference this year. My first in-person conference since before having my little one and since Covid. The rhetoric from the University is laughable: they do not want anyone to be disadvantaged and everyone, especially carers, should be able to benefit from the same opportunities to advance their careers as others... and therefore they make a maximum of £250 available to cover care during the attendance of conferences and other training events.... Anyone who has attended an academic conference and who has had to pay for childcare knows that £250 does not go far at all! Unless you have a partner, family member or friend who would be able to travel with you and provide childcare free of charge and cover part of their own travel/accommodation/subsistence costs, then at best you can probably cover a few hours of childcare by an external provider... And honestly, I do not know of many who simply 'leave' their young children with unknown carers even for a few hours. And if they did, it would be emotionally excruciating. So what? What is left for us to do? You disappear from the rest of the conference? You partially attend? Or simply make the decision to not attend and 'pause' your attendance. I cannot help but feel angry and frustrated once again".

In the vignettes above there is a disassociation between the breastfeeding maternal body and the academic body: the former cannot be without its counterpart (the child), whilst the latter demands free movement across spaces. We were privileged enough to receive support from our partners who took annual leave and paid their own expenses to provide free childcare. However, academic work positioned us as breastfeeding mothers in opposition to being academics. Invisibility thus was the consequence for resisting such positioning. In other words, whilst breastfeeding mothers can decide to defer participation to these in person events, their decision places them at the margins, in invisible spaces. Here academic work seems not only to promote a neutral body (one that is not breastfeeding, not differently abled, etc.), but to also marginalise those that resist such move.

"As I stand here, outside of the conference venue after the session, playing with my 2.5-year-old, other conference participants are watching. Some smile. Others just watch. The toddler runs to the stairs where loads of people are sitting and imitates them, sitting in the sun. One of the conference people – someone I do not know – comments to his neighbours on why there is a young child here. I arrive quickly and overhear so I joke, 'youngest conference participant here', and show the pretend badge I have made for my toddler. They giggle and one of them goes 'Oh this is lovely, maybe I should also consider bringing my children with me next time'. I politely excuse us, keep walking around. I meet people I know; they comment on my child. They do not ask about how the conference is going or my view on it or other academic topics. They see me the mother and not me the researcher. There is not even a slight consideration of the fact that I can be both simultaneously. This seems too remote a possibility."

"We bump into someone we have known for a long time at the conference. The topic of family and children comes to the table. He talks about his family and gives the impression they are here too, but it turns out they are not. He seems concerned that we are sacrificing precious networking opportunities, like the conference party, to be with our toddlers and partners. In reality, we are quite happy to escape these events. From experience they are the showgrounds for the masculine egos."

"I am walking towards my partner and child as the conference session has ended and see an academic friend. We start talking about the conference and I tell her my family is here, she should come and say hi. I turn to ask if her baby and husband have joined her too, but she seems to rush to justify being here on her own and going to the networking event happening now. Inside, I feel ashamed: I have asked a question that might have prompted unnecessary sense of guilt, the need to justify. I doubt if I had asked a male colleague with similar family arrangements, he would feel the need to explain that his baby actually doesn't need him home all the time."

Another way the embodiment of the 'academic neutral body' is emerging is when the 'naturalness' of the body comes into play:

"My study leave has been granted but no support has been provided so I can benefit from the same experiences as colleagues who could easily travel abroad and relocate – expenses of travel and accommodation are covered by the policy, you can budget for these, but somehow there is no provision for childcare. This is apparently a cost 'irrelevant' to matters of research and academic work. And no, I am not considering a to-and-fro approach to an extended research visit to make it work, what about the environmental impact of that? Nor am I considering simply 'leaving the family behind', what about the emotional toll on all of us? I raised the issue with my head of EDI and the Athena Swan lead in my School who took it further as a crucial EDI matter. It took weeks to get anything back and the response from the high circles of the University came as 'nothing can be done as it is a personal choice'. I am free to dream of the same opportunities, to dream of research visits, to plan them but that is where my freedom allowance stops it seems."

Policies in the neoliberal University constrain our freedom all the time. We see here a tension between demands to be care-free as part of academic work and how institutional structures do not permit that freedom to happen. That tension is not experienced by all 'bodies' in academia but those 'caring bodies' who are less able to move 'freely'.

"I'm running to the nursery. I was busy working on some research matters, and I did not see their message (through the app) that I should go to feed my baby as he was unsettled. My heart is pumping strongly, my breath is heavy, I am literally running across campus to reach the nursery room. I cry. I feel a horrible mother uncaring for her child."

Our experiences above speak of a body (the maternal, hormonal, and breastfeeding body) as something that needs to be kept under control (Pecis, 2016), to be managed, and to be commented upon. They call us to reflect on the need to make a body that is 'erupting' less so, to perform academic work, but also that women's bodies are socially monitored (Korica, 2022).

"While being pregnant there was an 'obvious' out there change in how I looked but for me personally there was limited change in my 'performance' and my ability to attend to task related to my academic role (teaching and research). Yet I was visibly becoming 'mother' in other people's eyes. Receiving (mostly unwelcomed) comments by colleagues and others at work, at conferences, etc."

"When I came back to work, I used the surprisingly good breastfeeding policy in my institution to work flexibly: I used that to flexibly work around my breastfed child, escape the oppressive presenteeism in all spheres. Physical presence was the hardest aspect of returning to work actually. After one three-hour long teaching session, I felt so self-conscious and not physically or emotionally comfortable to carry on. I asked to have teaching moved online if possible. It was emotionally hard to do as well, to ask for help, to admit I was not able to just be 'as before'."

I knew it was temporary but still. Then Covid-19 hit – which meant I actually could simply not have to fully disclose that being a mother affected me.”

“I started buying larger clothes, as I felt the need to hide my pregnant body since the very early stages. At that time, I was teaching, feeling quite unwell and carrying around a bottle of ginger hot water to try to calm the nausea. When asked what I was drinking I would say ‘ginger helps with the metabolism’. I welcomed the wave of strikes as I felt too tired to be able to stand up, conscious about my body and afraid to feel sick in class (I would also carry a lemon and crackers in my bag, just in case). Some colleagues noticed my eating habits and my larger figure. It felt like a huge task to keep my body under ‘control’ (not being sick in class or in meetings, not gaining too much evident weight) until the first lockdown came in. By that time my teaching was almost over, and I simply moved my last lecture online. This was a bliss; I didn’t need to hide anymore, and I could tell my other colleagues about my pregnancy.”

“All the rest of the pregnancy, besides one day I went into the office to collect the computer screen to bring home, I was off radar and only saw friends/colleagues when walking outdoors. Not being seen to me was the best part of the process, not receiving comments, or being noticed in my body changes, not having to ‘hide’ the pregnancy any longer.”

In both cases, we see a further scrutiny of the maternal body underpinned by the assumption that the academic worker’s body is neutral because it needs to perform academic work in a linear (and almost presential) way. This is regardless of the ups and downs of what different bodies might experience, such as maternity, menopause, physical/mental health issues, among others. For example, Beck, Brewis and Davies (2019) have also revealed the hidden processes that define the usefulness of an employee (by determining the timing of their departure). Such usefulness is linked to the performing body, a body that does not seem to feel, generate, or experience life as such. Thus, those non-neutral bodies are further scrutinised, subject to unwanted attention. Previous work has highlighted that within research and innovation contexts breastfeeding and pregnant researchers might second-order their bodies to perform research activities (in effect, nullifying their maternal body) (Pecis, 2016). Instead, we see here that in the academic context the flexibility afforded enables women to reflect and resist such disqualifying practices. However, such resistance is again met by a collective narrative that disqualifies maternal bodies marking them as problematic sites of control and exclusion. Not only, resistance produces material and physical strains that are put upon these (already strained) bodies.

To escape this, we suggest that academic work should allow us to be true to our own bodies (pregnant, breastfeeding, dis/abled), not confining them to the desk and the office, but to allow them to operate freely in a *flexible* way. In this way, we acknowledge and take into account that our bodies don’t perform the same way throughout the day, as well as coming to appreciate the multiplicity of academic bodies.

4.2. Neglecting care, body and emotions

In the vignettes below, we reflect on our absence from work, our return, and how the transition was negotiated and experienced.

“I am still on maternity leave and catching up with a colleague over our co-created module. She took an overdue sabbatical during my maternity leave so that our module did not need to run. She breaks the news to me, as I was talking to her on the phone and taking my little one for a walk that our module has been laid down for good. The reason: the department needs to reduce the number of modules. We were not consulted on this. I felt that our non-presence meant decisions would be taken for us. We created this module from scratch, developed a case study that is part of a forthcoming book and always received extremely positive feedback on the module from students. Yet, the decision was made with no possibility to appeal.”

“On my return my managers decided I should have a reduced teaching load and take a sabbatical in the summer term, something I did not particularly want nor requested. I outlined how it made little sense to me and that I was happy to go back as normal, but seemed that my maternal body meant I couldn’t perform as I used to? Or that it couldn’t decide how much load it could take? Or that I have less voice to shape my next academic year planning?”

“Once I gave birth, my body actually went back to its old self quite quickly and somehow my identity as a ‘mother’ became invisible to others once again. I had to remind people I had a three-months old baby when attending a conference in February 2020 (a conference I had organised before and during my maternity leave!). Most of the impact from motherhood for me has been post-birth – lack of sleep, breastfeeding, dependence of another human being on me, renegotiation of my own identity, changing hormones and body... and yet this is largely ignored because it is not seen.”

“I returned to work soon after my baby was born (he was barely three months old) and I had to go back to the classroom. Funny enough I had no real sense of what it would be like after childbirth to return to work but yet had to make all sorts of plans in anticipation of how I would be feeling. I remember my Head of Department asking whether I thought I’d be OK to return to teaching as normal. It was hinted that I was a high performer and I looked ‘well’ so there was no worry. I felt the pressure to perform and anticipate positively – I did not ask for reduced teaching or accommodation. I also did not want to burden my colleagues – because actually my maternity cover involved pushing my load onto others rather than resourcing appropriately (and my load fell mostly onto other women!)”

The vignettes above speak to us of how decisions around academic work for mothers have been taken to ensure their smooth and ‘normal’ return to work. In the first part of these stories, the rational choice of laying down a module as the convenors were physically absent is used to justify the lack of consultation and involvement in the decision making. What seems to have been driving the choice of the managers is the rational thought of minimizing disruption and complying to pressures from the top to simplify the offering of modules. However, what this choice shows is the lack of consideration towards the emotional impact these rational decisions might have on returning mothers, where work and decisions have been made for them.

In the latter part of the story, pressures to perform ‘as usual’ are defined by the lack of alternatives in place (e.g., lack of replacement and burdening colleagues with more work instead of resourcing appropriately), exposing the faulty structures of the institution. What is emerging through our stories is a questioning of how the maternal body ‘can cope’ or ‘should cope’ when visibly back at work (as we discuss later, even if invisible, our academic work continued throughout the maternity period). Instead of questioning the institutional constraints that mark some bodies as unsuitable for the ‘normal’ job performance, it is the maternal body that is questioned in its functioning and production.

Not only do we see this played out through our institutions, but also continued on discourses on social media platforms around the ‘supra-performing’ (Gatrell, 2011) academic mother, one that can teach and research whilst caring for her child at home.

“After becoming mother, I started following posts related to parenthood and motherhood on social media. At times I guess I was looking for answers that no one could give me. At times I just felt that I needed a place of belonging, to be part of a community that I could not find elsewhere. I am relaxing at home, scrolling through my social media, and here these images run through my phone. In my mind, a piece of me is attached to each of these pictures from fellow academic mothers. Yet I also feel very detached from some of the perspectives they are emphasising; the obsession with productivity, work at all costs, the search for solutions and recipes to fit within the normalised view of success in academia. I find some of this triggering and uncomfortable. Surely there must be a different way forward?”

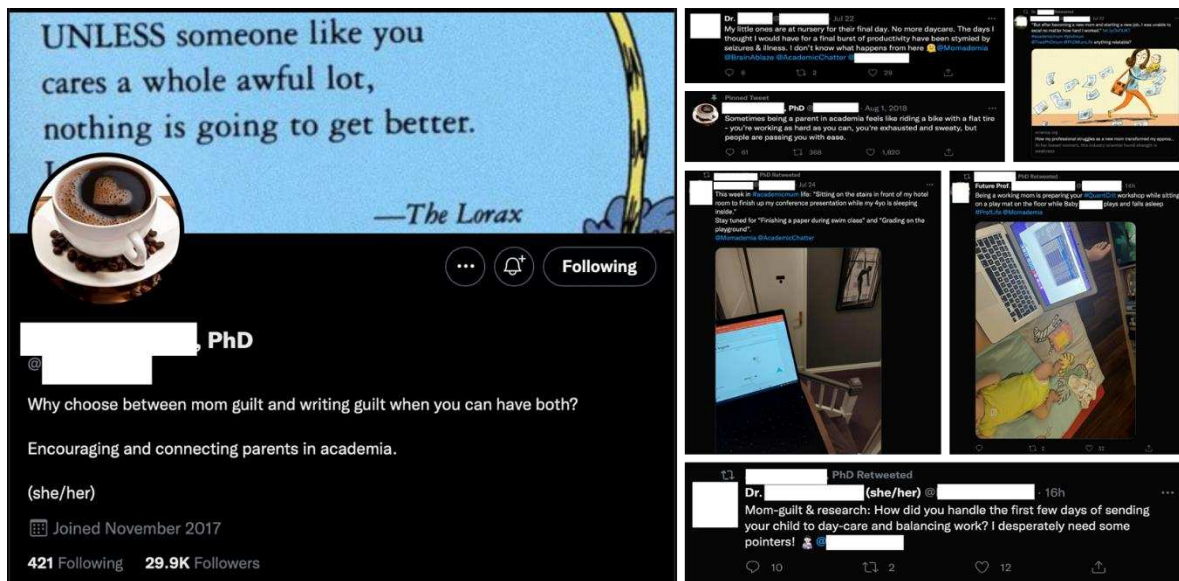


Figure 1. Screenshots of experiences of academic mothers on social media (Collage by authors)

This seems to contrast with our experiences of caring for our children during the pandemic:

“As many in the sector, I am an expat living away from close family and have no access to ‘free’ childcare. The care falls on me or my partner (but in the early days, weeks and months usually me as the breastfeeding mother!). So, when there is anything going on at the nursery, then everything is out of the window as this means working with my child at home – which is actually impossible to do. I nearly had a burnout in the winter 2020 after the autumn semester where we had so many nursery closures and I had a heavy teaching semester (yes all online but still requiring so much). Funny enough a colleague once referred to me as the ‘caretaker’ of our large undergraduate modules in the department – overall that’s over 500 students.”

What is more, the trend on social media has been for academic mothers to use scientific evidence and publications related to Covid-19 to talk about the dangers of sending their children to nursery and other childcare settings. This rationally justified the duty of keeping them home and being the superhero mother, doing it all, performing on all fronts. This has made us both feel extremely guilty for sending our children to nursery. The sense of guilt is reiterated in our experiences of taking leave and trying to work while on leave:

“You are lucky you didn’t have to teach during the pandemic’. These words stuck with me the whole year as I was discussing with a senior colleague about my return to work in June 2021. It took me by surprise, as no question was asked about how it might have felt to be pregnant, access healthcare provision, deliver a baby and care for a new-born during a pandemic. Yet, my pregnancy was seen as a sort of ‘luck’ to escape my duties as an academic”.

“I was working until three days before delivery, even if officially on maternity leave. I had a deadline for a paper (that I submitted in early October after I gave birth in mid-August, and that was then rejected). I was also working on the paper after giving birth (I allowed my post-natal body a couple of weeks to recover, then started again working on it having my son in my arms and the laptop on my legs). It was a feminist special issue, and I was invited by one of the editors to participate. I told her I would be having a baby and that I might not be able to submit, but then asked her for an extension and submitted the paper. I received the reviewers’ comments and the editor’s comments, and I was shaken by the response. I did not mind the rejection, it’s part of academic work, but given that I pre-empted her of my pregnancy and

delivery, the neutrality of the email felt that I should have performed as if nothing had happened in the weeks preceding the submission: 'We, the editors (names) were really excited about your submission but when we read the manuscript in the light of the reviews we could see that it needed significant development. We think that you should seriously consider doing this, based on the reviewers' comments.'"

"I felt mother in my work too, especially with personal tutees because they were struggling and in isolation – lots of emotional labour here."

Combined, these pressures to supra-perform are driven by the intellectual domain, underpinned by rational choices, with little body/physical embodiment beyond the physical performance of teaching (removed by the lockdown restrictions in place for a little while). Mothering, on the other hand, is raw, instinctual, all about the body and its changes, its abilities. It is also filled with essential, 'dirty' work, which is often talked about by mothers collectively (dealing with child sickness, etc.) (Guyas and Poling, 2011). Again, there seems to be a disassociation of the rational, clean cut, realm of academic work against the material/physical/emotional and dirty work of motherhood.

4.3. The altruistic process of care as an alternative to the individualised 'output' imperative

We never know when the breastfeeding will stop, when our children will walk, say their first words or sentence; what is important to us as mothers is the shaping of a new individual. As mothers, we are not valued based on when the child starts walking, talking, etc. Instead, we might be valued for how the child becomes a respectful and sensible individual on the long term. The sacrifices we do, are for that reason:

"My identity as a mother is quite clear; my tired eyes tell the story every day I go in the office, and my body shape is still not the same as before. When asked, I do say I did not sleep because my son wanted to breastfeed all night. A typical response is: 'why don't you just stop breastfeeding?' or 'can't he take a bottle?' or more recently 'isn't he old enough now?'. I feel that instead of having a sympathetic listener, I need to justify why I want/need to breastfeed, why I am making such choice (even if to me it does not feel like a choice) as if I am the one responsible for my own sleep deprivation."

If we take motherhood as the logic that drives not only our childbearing work, but also our academic work, then we might displace value from the output (the grant won, the paper published, the teaching score achieved), onto the 'dirty' work, the ups and downs, hardships and learning that are part of the process of doing motherhood/academic work. We suggest that focus towards the process of doing academic work versus just the end-product might be a more realistic measuring of what being academics entails.

When we value academic work solely based on outputs, we individualise it. In other words, the publication (output) is considered an individual un/success, which is a disregard for the usually collective process behind it (collective discussions of ideas, reviewers' inputs, editors' suggestions and decisions, institutional constraints that hinder/facilitate the research environment and so on). However, what we find is often that academic work is a process where resistance to such individualisation happens, and where care can take place:

"I revisited my work schedule a little while back, even before becoming mother. I do not work evenings or weekends. I am more vocal about that now, the approach enables me to spend time with my family – this goes against the normalised discourse of the academic who works constantly, every day, every night. Round the clock to perform"

"My academic work is entirely collaborative; I do not work on research projects alone. I feel so lucky to have developed and nurtured such fantastic relationships with colleagues across my academic circles. I have always known this is a very important part of how I do academic work"

but then it is in the winter 2019-20 when I really appreciated the value of this collective approach. We are sitting around the dinner table in my house with my two co-authors, having tea and cake whilst co-writing the revision for our paper. I have the baby with me, just a couple of months-old, tiny being snoozing in my arms. We think, we debate about sentence formulations, we laugh, we write. In that moment, I am all-at-once, the writer, the mother, the colleague, the friend.”

“A senior person in the university is organising a writing retreat for a programme I was accepted for. I tell her that I would love to participate but that I am breastfeeding so I might not be able to do so as it requires being away from campus. She replies with her full support and saying how hard it was for her, a breastfeeding mother, at the time without support, and that she will make sure I can attend, at the pace I am able to. And so, I did. For the first time since I got back to work, I felt my maternal body is not at odds with my academic body. They can coexist, and they can produce impressive results (with my collaborator we were able to put down the ideas for the funding and the narrative around the case). Maybe it is just a matter of recognition and support, I started thinking.”

We can resist the individualised discourse of outputs by taking *care* (as relationality) seriously and embodying it into academic work. We thus can open up possibilities to create supportive environments that allow academic mothers (and other non-neutral bodies or other caring bodies) to thrive. By embracing an ethics of care, we recognise that *care is a moral practice* and way of living that appreciates ‘vulnerability, interconnectedness, dependency, embodiment and finitude as basic characteristics of human life’ (Sevenhuijsen, n.d. cited in Martin et al., 2015, p. 628).

5. Conclusion

In this provocative piece, we have tried to problematise the current state of academic work in the UK neoliberal university, specifically how academic work is understood and what it incites academics to be/become. Our reflections guided us to reveal the patriarchal assumptions that underpin academic work, namely the focus on productivity and performance, on rational thinking as the basis for academic production, and an emphasis on outputs measured by metrics such as publications, successful funding applications, among others. Guided by our autoethnographic accounts of academic motherhood, we reveal that today academia creates an *individualised, neutral (disembodied), output-focused and control-oriented* understanding of academic work.

Not surprisingly, the *individualisation* of academic work, as one own's responsibility to succeed and ‘make it’ to the top is underpinned by the contemporary logics of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) that emphasises choice and self-discipline of the working woman and mother (Adamson and Kelan, 2008; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017). In other words, if an academic mother cannot manage her productivity and *outputs* as the ideal academic should, it is because she has not found a way to manage and balance her work and personal life. This narrative reinforces the idea that academic mothers should control their bodies, manage their emotions and their work-life balance in a way that allows them to perform at best in both (separate) worlds.

This narrative is also reinforced in current social media accounts of academic motherhood that we have encountered. As academic mothers, we were exhorted to keep our children safe at home (throughout the pandemic) and work whilst they slept or played. When not complying to this ideal mother, we felt the pressure of failing in caring, failing in being ‘good moms’. As such, we are confronted, as academic mothers, with ‘ideal mother norms’ (Miller and Riley, 2020) that associate motherhood with nurturing and loving their children’s development (Douglas and Michaels, 2005). The digital sphere thus becomes another terrain where further self-regulation and policing of mothers in their feelings and behaviours (Orgad and Gill, 2021) happens. In other words, the working mother is invited to ‘keep it cool’ vis à vis being left on her own to manage caring and work responsibilities, as well as to ‘embrace’ being a mother.

We find this postfeminist sensibility, as it is played out for academic mothers, problematic for several reasons. First, it individualises responsibility, making collective action no longer needed or possible. In short, the academic mother is the sole accountable for her failures (or lack of expected productivity). It also hinders understanding of how current structures place women and diverse bodies as marginal to the neutral (academic) body. Breastfeeding bodies are expected to perform as neutral bodies, or bodies devoid of love and care, to meet the institutional expectations of performance. Third, such sensibility relies on a dichotomic understanding of motherhood as opposed to the working (academic) woman. We found throughout our stories a disassociation between the breastfeeding body and the academic body. We argued that such disassociation rests on understanding academics as *neutral bodies* at work. For this reason, bodies that leak, generate, and feel need to be controlled, disciplined, and kept under further (unwanted) scrutiny. We suggested this is particularly relevant for breastfeeding mothers and women in academia.

With this paper, we contribute conceptually to current research on academic work by proposing an alternative to ongoing marginalising discourses. We use the lens of *'motherhood'* to show its power in opening up an alternative way of conceptualising academic work, centring on embodied care, and appreciating the non-linearity and messiness of life. Whilst emphasis is often placed on women who are mothers to find wholeness (Pillay, 2009), we argue that we need to interrogate and reframe the system and structures that contrive them – not in terms of infrastructural solutions or tweaks to what already exists (Fulweiler et al., 2021), as they operate *within* the existing parameters. We advocate to redefine these parameters, by contesting the neutrality and disembodied way of thinking of academic work. Academic work is work of care, driven by emotions and feelings. As such, spaces for solidarity otherwise unthinkable and suppressed, where the shared experiences, i.e. such as that of breastfeeding for mothers, can blossom.

In embracing motherhood, we suggest that we can revalue academic work as *work of love and care*. We advocate for valuing the love that drives our research efforts (i.e., we spend years studying certain topics because we do care about them); for valuing appropriately the bits of academic work that are about care (the teaching, the citizenship, the mentoring), which are constantly undermined by performance parameters; for bringing to light and valuing the messiness and *'dirty'* sides of academic work (e.g. unfinished papers, review and revision processes, emotional roller coasters and self-doubt, rejections, the making of slides). We also find that care and love take at times the form of dullness: the dullness we experience sometimes when we breastfeed grounds us in the present and makes us appreciate moments which are about doing nothing. Like the experience some mothers have of the *'breastfeeding room'*, we feel that academic work needs also to give space to meditation, where contemplation, being in the present and in no need to rush can exist. By embracing this *'dull'* side of motherhood, we allow more room for creative exploration.

Like others before us, we want to see a new model of academic work. Differently, however, we want this change to be not simply a rethinking of work-life balance, or a call for reinvigorated policies (Mason et al, 2013), but a paradigm shift in what work is valued, one that goes beyond rationality and performance driven metrics. As such, the implications of our work for moving academia forward revolves around reworking academia through a number of points. First, academia should allow *flexibility*. Academic work can and should be flexible to accommodate the different pace at which multiple bodies operate at different points in time. This revolves not only around breastfeeding and reproductive bodies but encompasses different bodies at different times of their lived experiences. Second, we encourage academia to embrace work of *care and love*. Academic work should allow for *'moments of dullness'* where exploration and creative thinking can happen. Not only, by embracing care and love it calls for appreciating those parts of the job that are often undervalued (e.g., not work loaded) such as mentoring, pastoral care of students and other colleagues, *'dirty'* and messy activities, and processes rather than polished end-products. Third, academia should appreciate *relationality*; care should be a moral practice in academic work. As such, academia should appreciate the relationality that drives it. We never think alone, and we can never do academic work in a vacuum:

instead, academic work is about connecting with the other in a meaningful way, to create spaces of solidarity and change. We now start to see academic spaces for writing that are inclusive and that create a supportive network. Often, these are confined to women-only spaces. We hope that these practices can over time be replicated in different contexts to allow diverse groups to create pockets of safeguarded spaces. Overall, the insights and action points generated in this paper stem from our embodied experiences as breastfeeding mothers in academia. We hope that these insights can foster a conversation with ‘othered’ bodies in academia, to build upon and drive towards a more inclusive view of what academia may look like, if the patriarchal, white, able-bodied norm is to be radically challenged.

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