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Commentary: Career progress relative to opportunity: how many papers is a baby 'worth'?

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Abstract

How many papers is a baby 'worth'? We were prompted to ask this provocative question by recent experiences, working on appointment committees and writing research grants in Australia, where provisions to quantify research track-records 'relative to opportunity' call for applicants to explain how fluctuations in their publication outputs have been impacted by 'career interruptions' such as childbearing. In this age of the increasingly neoliberal university—where every activity, output, and impact is audited (Castree, 2000; 2006)—our commentary seeks to question how decision makers account (or not) for the career impacts of having children.

Keywords

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Career progress relative to opportunity: how many papers is a baby ‘worth’?

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Career progress relative to opportunity: how many papers is a baby ‘worth’?

How many papers is a baby ‘worth’? We were prompted to ask this provocative question by recent experiences, working on appointment committees and writing research grants in Australia, where provisions to quantify research track-records ‘relative to opportunity’ call for applicants to explain how fluctuations in their publication outputs have been impacted by ‘career interruptions’ such as childbearing. In this age of the increasingly neoliberal university – where every activity, output and ‘impact’ is audited (Castree, 2000; 2006) – our commentary seeks to question how decision-makers account (or not) for the career impacts of having children.

Our interest in this issue is both personal and political. We are both female early career researchers and each of us had our first (and currently, only) child within one year of attaining our doctorates. One of us has a continuing/tenured position at an Australian university, the other is on a fixed-term contract. The demands on our time have been stretched considerably since starting our families; and an acute watchfulness of output and productivity is never far from our minds. We worry about not being able to keep up with the expected pace of publishing, gaining grants and teaching in between, thus remaining competitive and employable. Of course, we are not the first academics to feel like this. Well-documented coping strategies adopted by female (and some male) academics include: waiting until tenured before having children or not having children at all, timing children to fit the academic calendar, working part-time, increasing research collaborations, hiding caring responsibilities, sleeping less, sacrificing personal lives and, for some, moving into the ‘second tier’¹ or opting out of academia altogether. It is against the backdrop of such prospects, and in the spirit of finding ways to incorporate parental responsibilities into the expectations of academic labour, that we

find ourselves taking seriously the seemingly callous question of how many outputs childbearing might be 'worth' within the academic workplace.

Although we are interested in the parenting experiences of female *and* male academics, childbearing and childrearing undoubtedly remain key sources of gender inequity in the academy. The under-representation of women in academia (particularly at the professorial level) has been explored by academic feminists since at least the 1970s (McDowell, 1979; Monk et al, 2004). Our concerns are positioned within a more recent body of scholarship that considers the gendered implications of neoliberalism, particularly for academics with caring responsibilities (Berg, 2002; Crang, 2003, 2007).

Notwithstanding the neoliberal audit culture of contemporary western universities, academia does enable valuable flexibility around work times and locations, not found in (many) other professions. However, policies designed to assist with 'work/life balance', and achieve greater gender equity, have had limited success (Bailyn, 2003; Berg, 2002). Important progress has been made in terms of increased access to paid parental leave, increasingly flexible working arrangements and (in the United States) scope to extend/stop the tenure clock to account for childbearing. But such policies remain inherently problematic: when academics (usually women) make use of them, they may be shooting themselves in the foot. Any reduction in quantifiable outputs (publications) affects opportunities to obtain grants, secure continuing/tenured employment and gain promotions. Berg (2002: 253) has thus referred to gender equity policies as 'empty referents', undermined by understandings of merit constructed around 'masculine norms of academic behaviour and 'productivity''. For Bailyn (2003), such policies have failed to achieve gender equity because they assume that being gender-neutral is sufficient.

Yet equity cannot be achieved while one group of people (in this case, academics with caring responsibilities for children) remain ‘systematically unable to meet the requirements of the ideal academic’ (Bailyn, 2003: 139) – who ‘works fulltime (and often overtime) and can move if the job ‘requires it’’ (Williams, 2000:5). Academic cultures, norms and expectations have not shifted to accommodate the lifestyles and career trajectories of academics with parenting (and other) responsibilities. A lack of ‘structural means’ for translating equity policies into ‘meaningful equity practice’ means that success in contesting the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ of academia in general, and of Geography in particular, has been circumscribed (Berg, 2002: 253).

The notion of the ‘ideal’ academic requires further unpacking. In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu (1988: 87) acknowledged that the academic field is structured according to an ‘ideal career...against which all other trajectories are objectively measured’. While we do not concur that an ideal career can be measured *objectively* (rather, understandings of merit are socially constructed), Bourdieu’s assertion resonates for those with parenting responsibilities². Bourdieu (1988: 87) also, and significantly, acknowledged the importance of *time* within academic careers – more specifically, that the ‘accumulation of academic capital takes up time’. Indeed, Bourdieu (1988: 96) insisted that the ‘sacrifice of time’ is ‘the most rigorously necessary condition for the accumulation of that particular form of symbolic capital known as a reputation for academic worthiness’. Such observations are alarming for academics with (young) children – a particularly time-poor bunch. For Crang (2003: 1715) normative assumptions of full-time academic workloads and linear career paths are ‘pretty unforgiving’ of the time-out necessitated by parenting (particularly for mothers) and thus ‘borde[r] on being discriminatory’. The academic curriculum vitae (or track record) is far from being an objective measure of

achievement – it is a shrine to the notion of linear career development – ‘publication after publication, paper presentation after presentation’ (Crang, 2007: 511) and a key instrument of neoliberal governance within the university sector.

Although our sympathies are intuitively opposed to the audit culture of neoliberal academia, failing a complete overthrow of this system, we wish to shift the impetus back onto university managers to accommodate the varied career trajectories of academics – in our case those with parenting responsibilities. In a sense, this commentary explores the potential to make use of politically productive spaces *within* neoliberalism (Larner, 2003) and seeks ‘strategies and tactics for an effective in-here activism’ (Castree, 2000: 969) with the potential (in our opinion) to shift understandings and measures of academic merit in ways that promote gender equity. We have structured this commentary around a discussion with our colleagues, initiated through a survey distributed to Australian academic geographers with children in 2011. Our discussion was framed (somewhat controversially, as it turns out) around the potential for parenting to be made to count in neoliberal terms. More specifically, we sought to unpack the meanings and implications of the principle of performance ‘relative to opportunity’ for those academics who have children.

Assessing merit relative to (what) opportunity?

In Australian universities (as elsewhere), legislation mandates Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies based on ‘merit’. Among other things, EEO policies seek to avoid discrimination associated with gender, caring responsibilities and pregnancy. The caveat ‘relative to opportunity’ is now included (in various guises) in most grant (and some job) applications in Australia³, in an attempt to operationalise ‘merit’. Since 2010,

Australian Research Council (ARC) competitive grant applications have included a section on ‘research opportunity and performance evidence’ (ROPE). Applicants’ ROPE statements allow them to identify career interruptions (including but not limited to childbearing), their date of PhD completion, the nature of their current and previous employment (full-time/part-time, teaching-research or research only) and periods spent in non-academic employment. Relative to opportunity measures such as these seek to provide ‘*positive acknowledgement of what can be or has been achieved given the opportunities available*’, but are not about providing ‘‘special consideration’ or expecting lesser standards of performance’ (Rafferty et al, 2010: 5, original emphasis). Ideally, a focus on achievement relative to opportunity provides scope to challenge the ‘existence of a singular norm’ against which all academic careers are measured (Dalton, 2011: 5). Here, we seek to interrogate the extent to which ‘relative to opportunity’ considerations can tangibly account for the impact of parenting on academics’ quantifiable outputs. We asked our colleagues what the phrase ‘relative to opportunity’ meant to them after having children, and the extent to which they felt it makes a difference to decisions about appointments, promotions and grant applications.

The consensus among most of our colleagues was that the application of ‘relative to opportunity’ fails to live up to its potential: ‘in my experience I feel that it has little bearing on the way I have been assessed’. Most argued that ‘relative to opportunity’ provisions make little if any difference to career outcomes. It was largely perceived as a ‘tokenistic gesture put on forms and never taken into account by the people who make decisions and evaluate work’. Some of our colleagues felt that ‘relative to opportunity’ considerations could not hope to outweigh universities’ overriding concern with ‘the bottom line of outputs’, rendering this phrase ‘nothing more than lip-service that

universities utilise to present a social concern that they don't buy in to'. Generally, the inclusion of this clause was thought to achieve little in terms of assessing merit and ensuring equity: 'At the end of the day, people who have not taken a break are advantaged'. An additional concern raised was that even if 'relative to opportunity' considerations were taken into account, they were limited to the period of the career interruption (in this case parental leave) and did not account for 'the way in which having a young child impacts on productivity even after returning to full-time work'. As a result, the term 'relative to opportunity' was deemed 'frustratingly inept at capturing the impact of parenting'.

Given the perceived ineffectiveness of the 'relative to opportunity' clause, the logical next step may be to directly quantify the impacts of career interruptions (such as childbearing) – so that these in turn 'count' in the unrelenting calculus of the neoliberal university. To interrogate this idea further, we presented our colleagues with the following scenario:

Imagine you are on an interview panel and are selecting a candidate for a continuing/tenured academic position. You are faced with the CVs of two otherwise, equally qualified candidates, but one of the candidates has a 'gap' in their publication record because s/he had a baby within the last 2-3 years. In an attempt to quantify the impact of child-related responsibilities on an academic career, a fellow panellist asks the following question after the candidate leaves the room: 'How many papers would a baby have prevented this candidate from writing?' That is, how many papers would we need to 'add' to this candidate's

CV in order to put him/her on an equal footing with the other candidate? How many papers is a baby 'worth'? What is your response?

To qualify this question, we are both post-structuralist cultural geographers who understand the importance of context specificity and acknowledge that some things cannot (or perhaps, should not) be quantified. Nonetheless, we asked the above question because we were interested in whether our colleagues had quantitatively considered the impact of parenting on their career outputs and how (or if) this would be independently judged. Our question plainly takes a quantitative approach to performance assessment, which grates somewhat against our own personal politics. But for Berg (in Castree, 2006: 766), it is academics' failure to recognise the impossibility of being positioned outside neoliberalism that prevents us from 'engaging effectively with neoliberal academia'. However opposed we may be to the neoliberalisation of our own labour, as young academics striving (hoping) for long-term academic careers, we cannot operate entirely outside its ambit. Rather, the best we can hope for is to occupy a 'paradoxical space' in relation to neoliberalism, within which there is room for contestation but which simultaneously (and unavoidably) reinforces neoliberal norms (Castree, 2006: 764-765). Within this context, it is not surprising that we (as academics with young children) started to wonder whether the only way 'relative to opportunity' could be made to 'count' for those of us with parenting responsibilities was to put a number to it.

So, how many papers is a baby worth?

We, perhaps naively, did not realise how much controversy our fictional interview scenario would engender. Because our respondents were all academics with children (and thus had experience of the issue at hand) we anticipated that they would respond

with a number. Although some did, they were the exception. Rather, most disagreed with the premise of our question (some quite angrily). It was not our intention to exasperate our colleagues or indeed to be controversial, but we no doubt opened a can of worms. This suggests either a desire to resist quantification per se (and the neoliberal audit culture more generally), or that people were confronted at the thought of having to think about their track records (and their children's impacts on said track records) in this manner.

For those who offered up a number, the average impact of parenting a young child (for the primary carer) was estimated at around three papers per year (over the 2-3 year period specified in the question). Our colleagues qualified their numbers with various considerations including: the duration of parental leave taken, whether the candidate returned to full-time or part-time work following leave, whether the candidate had previously been in a teaching-research or research only position, as well as the candidate's previous publication track-record and field of research. For example:

It's hard to gauge. Probably 3-4 per year on average...it depends how much leave they took. If one year, then 3-4 papers. But this also depends on the field of research and other factors - I am assuming this is a teaching and research role. If research only, then more papers.

Depends on what they were doing previously, their publication trajectory etc. I would guess 1-2 papers per year, but if previously they were writing 1 or were writing 6 then the answer would be different.

Several more colleagues disliked the premise of our question and wished for more holistic measures of candidate 'quality':

[Y]ou cannot quantify output and productivity like that...we need to take a more contextual holistic look at the CVs to suss out the candidates and what they have to offer in a range of areas.

I think that is the wrong question to ask...If the candidate is promising - I would encourage my colleague to rephrase their question to, 'how can we help this candidate achieve their research aspirations and potential as a member of this department?'

I would never give someone a job on quantity of pub[lication]s anyway. Quality is what counts. I would argue against counting up and comparing on those grounds...and insist on avoiding numerical comparisons of pub[lication]s outputs. The right person in the job producing less because of parenting is always preferable to someone more productive on paper but who isn't quite right.

Others, while uncomfortable with the audit culture acknowledged that this is the (flawed) reality of contemporary academia:

I'm not really sure how I feel about this...surely it should be about more than papers but I know this is the system, so at least the panel is asking a question that recognises having children [has] impacts. But there wouldn't be a magic

number of papers, so the panel would still be subjectively applying a judgement here.

Some were angry with our question because they felt it implied the inability of academics with children to perform at the expected level: 'What a ridiculous question. Having a baby has nothing to do with ability to perform', or:

I would hope that senior staff would express EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] principles. Senior staff in my faculty would never allow this conversation...In numerous committees at my university the importance of 'relative to opportunity' has been asserted.

Are you serious??? I would probably have a heated discussion with the other panellist. I think I would personally be offended by the comment/question. I have been a selection panel chair and would not have seriously considered the question in my role on the final choice of candidate.

As the completed surveys (and related email) rolled in, we became concerned that perhaps we had asked an inappropriate or unanswerable question. Our own differences of opinion also became more apparent. One of us was stridently committed to the importance of quantification, while the other remained somewhat sceptical of its merits, but recognised the utility and timeliness of at least posing the question. Notwithstanding our own dissonant perspectives on the scenario we had set, we both felt increasingly uncomfortable with the potential implications of having irritated so many of our colleagues.

However, our survey findings and fictional scenario received a constructive response when presented at the Critical Geographies conference held in Frankfurt in 2011 (Drozdowski and Klocker, 2011). We were encouraged by the other session participants' willingness to engage with this issue, and felt that by airing our findings and observations we could contribute to debates occurring in other countries. Most specifically, in the United Kingdom, a decision was made under the recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) consultations for 2014 that each period of maternity leave would equate to a reduced output expectation equivalent to one paper (out of a minimum of four) across each four year period (HEFCE, 2011). Although we (and others) may not agree that one paper per four years sufficiently reflects the impacts of parenting, we will watch closely how this decision influences gender equity within the UK academy in the coming years.

Quantification in action

In Australia, Monash University's Equal Opportunity for Women Committee recently sought to establish a 'formula' for more equitably assessing merit across diverse career trajectories (Dalton, 2011). The committee argued that existing assumptions of the 'ideal' academic worker anticipate an uninterrupted career trajectory, limited domestic responsibilities and a '(more than) full-time' commitment to the job (Dalton, 2011: 2). The premise of the Monash committee's discussion paper was that life circumstances (including but not limited to childbearing) 'do not alter one's capacity to produce high quality work but may impact the *quantum* of productivity' (Dalton, 2011: 4, emphasis added). This necessitates an assessment of achievements relative to the 'actual time and specific opportunities' available to individuals (Fowler and Dalton, 2011:3), rather than

more traditional measures of merit which promote 'white, bourgeois, masculinity' within the academy (Berg, 2002: 250). In our opinion, the approach being adopted by Monash University has the potential to 'scrutinise and deconstruct the established academic habitus' of those who hold and continue to accumulate the most cultural capital under the existing rules of the game, and who typically profit over those who do not (and cannot) fit their singular mould (Reay, 2004: 35-36). It does so by requiring decision-makers to assess performance on an individualised and pro-rata basis, as exemplified by the sample calculation below:

During the 3 year period under consideration, Person A spent 9 months in a full-time, Research Only position [100%]...They then had maternity leave for 9 months which was viewed as representing 0% research opportunity. Upon returning to work, Person A worked part-time in a Research Only position which was viewed as representing 50% research opportunity. The total amount of research opportunity therefore, during the 3 year period was 18 months, or 50% research opportunity. Person A produced 3 papers during the 3 years. These 3 papers were then adjusted for opportunity ($3/0.50$) which meant that had this person had 100% research opportunity during the whole period, they would have produced 6 papers (Fowler and Dalton, 2011: 4).

The guidelines for decision-makers produced in conjunction with the Monash Discussion Paper also provide scope for acknowledging the impact of parenting on academic outputs *after* an individual has returned to full-time work following parental leave (Fowler and Dalton, 2011). Although less detail is provided about how such a calculation would be performed, it is encouraging to witness an appreciation that

academic life does not necessarily return to 'normal' after a period of parental leave.

The proposed formula may, however, be of limited utility to academics who (like us) only take a few months of parental leave, or (again like us) had children before establishing a track record against which to compare subsequent productivity.

Nonetheless, the Monash approach (which has been adopted as policy at that university) at least moves away from a singular notion of the 'normal' academic trajectory and opens up possibilities for multiple, contingent and individualised understandings of academic career paths and merit.

In this commentary, we have argued that geographers concerned with issues of gender equity and work/life balance in academia should not shy away from seeking productive political spaces within neoliberalism (Larner, 2003), nor from asking difficult questions relating to the assessment of merit within our discipline. For Larner (2003: 511-512) many geographical discussions of neoliberalism 'focus on documenting what we have lost' and frame neoliberalism as a 'top-down impositional discourse', creating a sense of 'fear and hopelessness' in the process. We too are concerned that simply critiquing the neoliberal audit culture at universities is not enough – a variety of means of acting, and acting now rather than later, ought to be pursued. One of these is to fold back the neoliberal logic of auditing into its own calculus, in ways that progress an affirmative agenda around institutionalised gender biases in academia. Perhaps – just perhaps – the audit culture of universities can be used to highlight (rather than diminish) the contributions of academics with caring responsibilities. At the risk of 'buying in' to neoliberal norms, we hope instead to challenge orthodox hierarchies and inequitable patterns of recognition and reward in the academy.

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Notes

¹Mason and Ekman (2007) have contrasted the 'second-tier' (lower prestige and often part-time research and teaching positions) to the 'fast-track' of the tenure system in the United States. Opting into the second-tier makes a return to the esteemed first-tier almost impossible – there are few 'second chances'.

²It should be noted that Bourdieu was more concerned with the role of social origins and connections, as well as economic and political resources (rather than gender) in reproducing dominant academic class structures.

³This principle is also being applied in some New Zealand universities – see for instance the University of Auckland's 'Merit Relative to Opportunity Policy'.