

# 31 Maternity leave experiences and implications in the neoliberal academy

Karen Jones

University of Reading, Reading, United Kingdom

## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

This paper is based on a study that involved secondary analysis of a mixed method online survey dataset with a sample of 450 women academics (82% UK and 18% international). The study explored the women's experiences of maternity leave in academia and their perceptions of the implications of maternity leave for their career. Finding that 69% of the sample continued to undertake core academic duties while on maternity leave, their motives for doing so were examined through thematic analysis of qualitative data. Four orientations adopted by the women were identified. Each orientation characterises unique aspects of neoliberal subjectivity. Foucauldian governmentality is used as an analytical tool to examine hidden mechanisms that undermine equality, diversity and inclusion policies and women's rights by effectively driving women to relinquish their maternity rights by undertaking academic work during maternity leave. Implications for research, policy and practice are discussed.

## Full paper

This research addresses the dearth of large-scale studies about female academic's maternity experiences of leave in academia and seeks to contribute important new insights into the influence neoliberalism in the academy.

The extant literature indicates that women academics suffer from inequitable maternity rights (Weststar 2012; Epifanio and Troeger 2019), ineffective family friendly policies (Feeney, Bernal, and Bowman 2014), and a lack of suitable formal policies to support career success (Gerten 2011). Neoliberalism has been implicated in women's plight, since it is associated with unmanageable workloads and the use of homogenised systems for measuring research and teaching performance (Erickson, Hanna, and Walker 2021; Gill 2009). Thus academics are compelled to work long hours as there simply is not enough time to do all the things the job requires. Pressure to meet performance targets such as those set for research outputs, can lead to exhaustion and disadvantage for women in the period following the birth of a child (Acker and Armenti 2004; Allison 2007; Mavriplis et al. 2010; Gerten 2011; Epifanio and Troeger 2019; Huppertz, Sang, and Napier 2019).

It is surprising given the burgeoning literature on the influence of neoliberalism in higher education that little rigorous analysis has been undertaken of the impact of neoliberalism on academic mothers (Huppertz, Sang, and Napier 2019), and even less on their maternity leave experiences. This empirical study addresses that gap.

The study involved secondary analysis of an online mixed method survey with 553 women academics, of which 82% resided in the UK and the remaining 18% in many other parts of the world. 444 (80.6%) had previously taken maternity leave and 107 (19.3%) were still on maternity leave at the time of the survey. The survey included quantitative and qualitative questions. Quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistics to produce frequencies and percentages to create a profile of participants. One multiple choice closed question was used for the main study. This asked about work and other activities undertaken by participants during the period of maternity leave. As part of the analysis, responses to this question were grouped into core academic duties, such as responding to email, teaching, doctoral supervision, grant writing, publishing papers etc., and another group of activities of a less demanding nature was created. This included activities such as keeping in touch with a mentor, attending a conference, accessing the university library etc.

The results of this analysis revealed that 69% of women continued to perform core academic duties during maternity leave. This result directed the qualitative phase of analysis, which explored women's motives for working during maternity leave and their perceptions of the implications of maternity leave for their career. The qualitative analysis

followed a six-stage thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2006). The qualitative findings identify four distinct motives – referred to as orientations. Each orientation characterises unique aspects of neoliberal subjectivity. The paper is not suggesting that women conform to one 'type' or neoliberal subject. Indeed, some women exhibited overlapping motives for working during maternity leave, and it is likely that motives may change over time, according to individual circumstances. However, the analysis reveals hidden mechanisms at play driving the women to effectively relinquish their maternity rights. In terms of the implications of maternity leave, upon returning to the workplace, many women reported that they experienced punitive measures and believed they were no longer seen as dedicated, ambitious or career oriented.

Foucauldian Governmentality is used to aid interpretation work of the results. This seeks to unravel the mechanisms compelling women to work during periods of formal maternity leave. The paper argues that under neoliberalism women's maternity protection and entitlements are being eroded and highlights implications for policy and practice.

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