

Navigating the 'hood: Where do all the Science mothers go in Academia?

When I was a 20-something year old starting out on my academic journey, I had an odd conversation about babies. In it, a professor bemoaned a female colleague as "*one of those* feminist-types" insistently vocal about the difficulties of combining motherhood with academia. "Good scientists", he commented, "would just get on with it and let their own merit speak for itself". I don't think I had much of an opinion back then, but I didn't stick my neck out and disagree. I wish that I had. These days I find myself "*one of those*" and like so many merited females that have bumped along this unmetalled road, am having a hard time leaving it to my merit to do the talking.

HESA¹'s 2016/17 figures suggest that while a sizeable 46% of all academic staff in the UK were female, something was still disproportionately preventing them or dissuading them from making it through the system, with only 25% of professors being women. Why? [A study by Georgina Santos](#) in 2019 found a negative link between being a woman and the likelihood of being employed at a senior level within Russell group universities, irrespective of childcare responsibilities. The gender gap is real and still to be bemoaned but [research](#) also shows that mothers (both inside and outside academia) tend to be seen as less competent, less committed, less likely to be hired and often have lower starting salary recommendations compared to non-mothers ([Corell, Benard, and Paik 2007](#); [Cuddy, Fiske and Glick 2004](#)). Add to that the "career scar" encumbered from [not having the time to apply for grants and fellowships](#), the penalties of [lower productivity in terms of publication](#) rate; the much decreased access to networks, collaborations and new discoveries bound into the [childcare-conference conundrum](#) and the [decreased mobility](#) that limits access to the hyper-niche job market that is international science. Suddenly, the price of parenthood, of part-time work and maternity leave seems intimidatingly steep. Indeed, [a number of studies](#) have found that academic women and [women in science](#) are more likely to be successful if they strategically delay or forgo marriage and children. Data from the US suggests that only one in three women who accepts a fast-track university job before having a child ever becomes a mother (Williams and Ceci, 2012) and among tenured faculty, 70 percent of men are married with children compared with 44 percent of women (Mason, Wolfinger and Goulden, 2013)

I was neither savvy nor strategic about children. My timing was terrible and I find myself in the quagmire of these issues. I struggle to keep my head above the academic water which, in science, flows fast and cares not that I am temporarily weighted down by 3pm pickups and night feedings. I have had to stomach colleagues "borrowing" my scientific ideas and running with them whilst I am incapacitated by the stringent time-constraints of tiny children. I have had to dispense with ego and pride and perfectionism. And because my planning was bad, I have found myself in limbo, too senior to apply for 99% of grants, still too precarious not to. But motherhood has taught me valuable lessons contrary to all the assumptions bound into our unconscious bias. Motherhood in all its wondrous, exhausting manifestations has schooled me in fortitude, patience and resilience. It has, with exquisite clarity, revealed my ability to endure more shit (metaphorically and literally) than I ever imagined possible.

You can load me high and heavy with deadlines and the bottomless neediness of tiny humans and, while I might be a little less fleet-of-foot, I generally won't let you down. I have learnt to be 100 times more efficient in my meagre work hours than my former self. I have learnt that you can deprive me of sleep for days, weeks, months on end, suck every last ounce of solitude and social life out of my chaotic existence but I will steadfastly continue to deliver food, love and silliness to the living room, papers to the publishers, data to the desks that need it and lectures to the teaching rooms. You can watch me squeeze the work of 2 full time jobs into a precarious part-time post and still make it to the nursery gates on time. You can judge me, exclude me, laugh at me if you like, gawd help us if we can't find the funny side of life with tiny, unreasonable humans. There will never be another point in life where so many people have asked so much of me. Nothing you can throw at me in the workplace will ever be harder than these few years spent spinning 1000 plates whilst walking the tightrope across toddlerdom to reclaim the identity of the woman I left behind. Like so many

¹ Higher Education Statistics Authority

other mothers negotiating work life in 'the hood' I have learnt the hard way what resilience really means. I have learnt that efficiency and empathy, [competence and warmth](#), are not mutually exclusive. It seems to me that when mothers do finally return to the workforce full-throttle they are more, not less, valuable than their non-parent colleagues and, it turns out, I'm not wrong. In [a study](#) of over 3000 women and men across a diverse employment landscape, women appear to contribute 10% more than their male colleagues. A [separate study](#) found that over the course of a 30-year career, mothers outperformed women without children at almost every stage of the game. In fact, mothers with at least two kids were the most productive of all.

These problems are not unique to academia or to science, but these are industries at the forefront of forging and shaping the minds of future generations, it matters that we get this right. Despite the progressive, pioneering position academia makes claim to as it strives to solve the biggest of societies problems, it is struggling to resolve its own hang-ups. The attitude of that Professor, now rarely uttered out-loud, is deeply embedded within the institutional infrastructure. Manoeuvring one of the worlds most intensely competitive systems towards a framework that allows time-out without penalty, will not be easy. As a community we have already recognised that motherhood knocks huge holes into the research-professor pipeline, that the difficulties faced when raising young families 'drive women out of scientific careers for which they are trained and in which they would be as successful as men were they to make the choice not to have kids' ([Williams and Ceci, 2012](#)). But I still don't see the part-time Associate Professor jobs. There is little in the way of substantial policies and funding for women to 'catch up' when they return to work. I don't know of a single job-share academic post in my field despite the [benefits to retaining women in senior leadership roles](#).

From a personal perspective, one thing is clear, wherever I choose to go next, know that I will not sit quietly and with my merits. I know their strengths, they are many, and when I've crossed this tightrope they may speak for themselves again but until then, I'll take the risk of being judged to shout loudly from the highwire in the hopes that things might be different for my daughters.