Parenting during the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020: Academia, Labour and Care Work

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic instigated fundamental challenges and changes to parents' working lives in Britain. This viewpoint article reflects upon the experience of balancing childrearing responsibilities with academic work across the Spring and Summer of 2020. It positions the removal of formal and informal childcare networks within the history of feminist demands around childcare and sets it against the background of the recent history of women and reproduction within Higher Education in Britain. Drawing upon feminist literature, personal experience, academic parents' testimony and emerging studies of the gendered effects of the crisis, the article explores some of the critical challenges that balancing childcare and academic work presented and offers some preliminary reflections on the experience of the concurrent 'double shift' the lockdown engendered.

In this 'Viewpoint' I reflect upon the experience of childrearing in Britain during the Covid-19 pandemic of March to August 2020. As has been broadly acknowledged, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities; despite a government rhetoric that stressed an 'all in it together' mentality, the demands imposed by the lockdown had sharply delineated consequences. These were perhaps differentiated most markedly by type of work, as those considered 'keyworkers' had a distinct set of demands placed upon them, while those in precarious financial positions and those without access to private outside space faced particular psychological and practical stresses. As the lockdown triggered by the pandemic progressed, however, conversation on social and in traditional media increasingly acknowledged the pandemic's gendered effects, with a particular emphasis on how the closure of childcare facilities might regress women's progress towards equality. There were indeed distinctive burdens imposed by the lockdown borne by parents: the emotional and practical demands of care work; the restriction of access to public space; the need to continue children's educations; balancing the demands of paid employment with the responsibilities of childrearing. For academics, the closure of physical campuses provoked a rapid pivot to online teaching and, for many, placed new prohibitions on their ability to do research without lessening the pressure to publish. Academic parents were liable to find themselves at the crux of these conflicting domestic and professional pressures.[1] Weaving together personal experience, historical sources, studies of the pandemic's effects, and the reflections of academic parents gathered via email survey, this viewpoint article seeks to explore how some of these demands were experienced by academic parents across the spring and summer of 2020.[2] It positions these against the recent history of childrearing and within the context of the contemporary British academy.

The experience of the lockdown is too profoundly shaped by personal circumstance to be able to draw universalizable conclusions from – although future historians will of course be obliged to undertake such a task. Academics in Britain had the curious experience of watching other nations impose lockdowns while in Westminster the government sat on its hands. Non-essential movement was banned in Italy on 10 March; in France and Belgium on 17 March; in Germany on 22 March; and in the United Kingdom on 24 March. Schools were usually closed to non-essential workers and vulnerable students before these measures were imposed, with Italy closing schools on 5 March; Spain, Germany, Belgium and Austria closing schools on 15 March, while France, Poland, Portugal and Hungary followed a day later. In the United Kingdom schools were closed on 23 March.[3] This meant that for many academic parents in Britain the predicament they found themselves in was not wholly unexpected, but it was nonetheless difficult to plan for. It is unlikely that of all the Covid-19 ephemera letters from nurseries and schools will be highly prized within archives, but for many academic parents the arrival of the notice of closure was momentous. 'Unfortunately due to the ongoing Covid-19 situation we have taken the difficult decision to temporarily close the Nursery from tomorrow Tuesday 24th March', the letter from our nursery stated ('our' nursery, because it does not merely provide a service to our daughter, but is a lifeline for her two working parents, too). 'We sincerely apologise for any inconvenience this causes and wish to thank all parents for supporting the nursery during this very difficult time for us all.'[4] The act of balancing full-time parenting and full-time work had begun for us a week earlier. 'Baby has been banned from nursery for 14 days', I texted my mother ruefully on 17 March. 'Face to face teaching already stopped, so running seminars online.' On my hand-scrawled to-do list for the week is the pithy, deceptively simple note: '*5. Sort online teaching*'.

Universities in the United Kingdom run to different timetables. For most universities, however, the lockdown arrived mid-teaching term, before the assessment period, at the point at which final year students are preparing for their dissertation submissions. For most academics, then, the move to online

teaching covered several weeks of seminars, lectures, and student meetings. It was clear that it would infringe upon, if not reshape entirely, students' assessment and drastically alter the rhythms of the summer months. At my institution the end of face-to-face teaching arrived in week eight of teaching block two. Visible in my diary through the Tipp-Ex are my cancelled seminars (a thin blue ghost of 'practice of history, 11-1' can be made out), research plans ('LA637.7>STU' evokes a time when it was possible to peruse the library shelves), funding briefings (the remnants of '3-4pm, Leverhulme, JC lecture theatre' is a reminder of a time when being in a crowded lecture theatre was normal) and 'open day, afternoon', can be discerned on the ensuing Saturday. Teaching; research; grant applications; student recruitment: the modern British university is more than a space in which young people are educated. The demands made of it, and of the people who work within it, are multiple. The weight of these demands provides a broader context to the experience of the lockdown as an academic.

The lockdown followed an already disjointed year within British higher education. Strike action over changes to the universities pension scheme (USS), but also relating to broader issues around casualisation, workloads, and pay took place at 74 universities across February and early March.[5] The longer history is one of increasing neoliberalisation, marketisation and the application of metrics to manifold parts of the institution, not least to research outputs and to student perspectives. The broader background to the crisis as it was experienced within academia, then, was already one in which the future of the higher education sector was being contested.

Motherhood and the academy

While the steps taken to inhibit the spread of Covid-19 might have brought pressures on academic parents into relief, they highlighted some enduring conflicts. Reproduction and the academy have not, historically, been seen to be complementary. Indeed, women's reproductive potential was long used to justify their exclusion from universities. In the early twentieth century it was wondered if the increasing education of white American women might lead to 'race suicide' by suppressing white women's entrance to marital life and maternity.[6] A lack of support for women's education was widespread: women comprised just 15 per cent of students in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, rising to around 23 per cent on the eve of the Second World War.[7] Full membership of some of Britain's most prestigious universities was withheld from them, despite their attendance at lectures and examinations. Oxford, for example, first allowed women to matriculate and graduate in 1920. Arguments for women's education were powerfully advanced, however, not least by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas,* published in 1938. 'What is this mysterious process that takes about three years to accomplish, costs a round sum in hard cash, and turns the crude and raw human being into the finished product—an educated man or woman?' she asked. 'There can be no doubt in the first place of its supreme value' she wrote.[8] Women's bodies - their association with nature, with the pain of childbirth, and with the home – was, she said, unfairly used to exclude women from universities.[9] Reproduction was fundamental to this:

> The priests and professors in solemn unison intoned: But childbirth itself, that burden you cannot deny, is laid upon woman alone. Nor could they deny it, nor wish to renounce it. Still they declared, consulting the statistics in books, the time occupied by woman in childbirth is under modern conditions - remember we are in the twentieth century now - only a fraction. Did that fraction incapacitate us from working in Whitehall, in fields and factories, when our country was in danger? To which the fathers replied: The war is over; we are in England now.[10]

Concern that women's unequal responsibility for reproduction and childrearing might entrench women's subordinated position in the academy has circulated through the Covid-19 pandemic. 'We are in England now' represents a return to the de facto norm in which men have accumulated benefits.

Indeed, mothers in the contemporary academy face additional challenges without the spectre of a pandemic. This process begins before children are even born; one recent study has argued that 'the pregnant body disrupts the masculine disembodied ideal academic worker norm'.[11] Women's pregnant bodies are an incursion into the supposedly incorporeal intellectual sphere. A lack of support for mothers contributes to the 'leaking pipe problem'. Vera E. Troeger, president of the European Political Science Association, has suggested that mothers in academia face 'an underrepresentation of women in higher academic positions… lower salaries, lower research outcomes and rates of promotion, lower fertility, and higher rates of family dissolution – while family and children seem to have either no impact or even a positive effect on the patterns of men's performance in the academic ranks.'[12] As she points out, the pay gap in academia endures. Just one fifth of professors are female and one-third of academics in the highest salary bracket are female: researchers have explained this as due to women's tendency to take career

breaks to have children, the lack of family-friendly institutional support, and their childrearing responsibilities.[13] 'If the academic community, and more broadly society, is interested in generating equal opportunities beyond just window dressing and keeping female human capital in the production process we have to ask ourselves how we can generate an environment that allows women to maintain productivity and keep up with their male colleagues despite child-rearing and family responsibilities' she urges.[14] Recent work by the Royal Historical Society has looked at female academics' experiences of discrimination and, as part of this, examined issues associated with childcare. The report discussed problems with maternity leave: maternity leave was equated with research leave; mothers were overloaded on their return to work; there was confusion about how maternity leave might be accounted for in funding and promotion applications.[15] It also noted that the onus to produce monographs disadvantaged historians with caring responsibilities; women were liable to get 'stuck' at particular career stages.[16]

As Helen McCarthy has recently shown, mothers' struggle to reconcile family life and paid work has a long history.[17] As McCarthy suggests, paid work has provided (some) mothers with opportunities for independence, skill acquisition, and meaning, while the ability to undertake meaningful paid work has been shaped by individual circumstance, legal prohibitions, the opportunities available, and social attitudes. [18] Attitudes have historically devalued female labour. As Laura King has demonstrated, despite an increased number of married women undertaking paid work in the post-1945 period, husbands and partners widely considered their wives' work to be of less value than their own, imposing a hierarchy of value in line with the period's conservative discourses and the enduring patriarchal 'breadwinner' model.[19] The postwar era was a period of enhanced interest in the relationship between paid work and family life. Some studies suggested that a way to reconcile the two was to undertake them in a staggered way. Sociologists Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein were optimistic in their 1956 study, *Women's Two Roles,* that the 'best of both worlds' was now a realisable goal for women, suggesting that women return to paid work once childrearing was completed.[20] Judith Hubback's study of educated wives, published 1957, similarly emphasised the potential for women to return to paid work after childrearing. As Carol Dyhouse has observed, this study was underpinned by the idea of waste: was the education of women a waste of educational resources if they subsequently entered fulltime domesticity? Was the nation wasting its intellectual resources by neglecting its educated women?[21]

Certainly access to higher education laid the ground for women to make enhanced claims about their hopes and expectations, forming a vital part of women's liberation. Indeed, the discontent experienced by educated women formed a part of the ferment of the Women's Liberation Movement. Here women pushed back at the isolation, intellectual stultification and boredom imposed by unrelenting domesticity and maternity. The psychological effects of this stultification were perhaps most influentially articulated in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique.*[22] In Britain, historian and feminist Sheila Rowbotham also noted that a shift in expectations had occurred, particularly among women who had gone into higher education; there was an 'assumption of freedom'. 'It was not that every woman suddenly became unhappy,' she suggested, 'but that significant numbers of women felt entitled to a destiny which was not simply domestic.' [23] Higher education was one of the mechanisms that made this alternative destiny possible.

As the first generations of women in higher education found, however, the academy was not always a progressive space. It was against this background that the feminist movements of the 1970s agitated for changes to higher education institutions, pioneering new fields of research and pointing to the structural sexism found in the academy. While in the early 1970s the American author and poet Adrienne Rich welcomed the 'women's university-without-walls', as women began 'reading and writing with a new purposefulness, and the growth of feminist bookstores, presses, bibliographic services, women's centres, medical clinics, libraries, art galleries, and workshops, all with a truly educational mission', she also acknowledged that the 'orthodox university is still a vital spot, however, if only because it is a place where people can find each other and begin to hear each other.'[24] However, Rich was emphatic on one point: there was 'one need that is primary if women are to assume any real equality in the academic world, one challenge that the university today, like the society around it, evades with every trick in its possession. This is the issue of childcare'.[25] The removal of childcare from British academics (and indeed from student parents) in March 2020 was wildly counter to this foundational cry.

Covid-19, parenting and care work

The recognition that childcare is work has been a critical tenet of feminist movements. As part of its broader critique of the family, parts of the British Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s

considered freeing women from the burdens of childcare to be a fundamental precept of their liberation. Indeed, free 24-hour nurseries comprised one of the four demands made at the Women's Liberation Movement's first national conference of 1970. As Sarah Stoller has argued, feminists suggested a 'multiple and at times conflicted analysis of women's caring activities.' 'On the one hand they sought to describe women's household work as insidious drudgery legible within a broader public context of exploitative patriarchal capitalism. On the other hand they articulated the social value of caring and lamented both the existing and imagined consequences of its reduction to mere work' she notes.[26] The importance of coming to a more equitable distribution of childcare was a theme that liberationist magazines repeatedly underlined. The editorial committee of *Red Rag*, a women's liberationist magazine, suggested that 'Our general concern with childcare comes from our location of women's oppression in their imprisonment in the house as wives and mothers'.[27] Childcare was seen to have importance beyond its implications for individual families: in 1979 Sheila Rowbotham explained that 'in demanding childcare, we are not only asking for a thing or for money, we are contesting for the use, control and distribution of social resources. This involves a concept of how we want to work, care for children and play and indeed to love. It means an argument about how life-time is apportioned between the sexes and between classes.'[28] Nonetheless, women grappled with the contradictions and constraints imposed by motherhood as structured by capitalism and patriarchy. Children 'undoubtedly form a major share of our restrictions, they structure our days, choices and decisions', four mothers wrote in *Red Rag* in 1976. 'Our work still takes second place to our primary responsibility for the children… we still ultimately do a double shift' they admitted, acknowledging that the 'gap between our consciousness, expectations, in this area is quite large.'[29] The need to do a double shift has never been removed, but during the pandemic academic parents – and indeed those with other caring responsibilities – were suddenly faced with doing both shifts simultaneously. Despite a commitment to teaching and research, the maintenance of human life (if the child was very young) or the development of human life (if the child was a bit older) was still an overriding responsibility. Our small daughter took her first steps in lockdown: only constant, undistracted vigilance could ensure that this new skill did not imperil her. Research, meetings, teaching preparation and emails were all subordinate to this imperative, and they could not be reconciled.

The 2020 lockdown did more than remove access to formal childcare: it imposed domestic isolation. In 1978 Dorothy Hobson, a member of the Women's Studies Group based at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies conducted research into working-class housewives with small children. 'It is the *isolation* of women within the home and the privatized nature of the work which they perform which some women have articulated as being a site of oppression for them', she observed.[30] During the lockdown both formal and informal networks that often make working lives possible (and affordable) for parents – grandparents, siblings, friends – were banished. The effects on childcare responsibilities was enormous. This was particularly acute for families of children with disabilities and special educational needs, many of whom lost vital support networks.[31] One recent study of the gendered division of childcare during the pandemic found that families with children under 12 were typically doing an average of 40 hours additional childcare per week in lieu of outside provision. 'This is equivalent to an additional working week in childcare, and most of it is being done by women', the authors observed.[32] The Office for National Statistics found that in the first month of lockdown women spent an average of two-thirds more time on childcare responsibilities than men, and that this difference was driven by the time women were investing in non-developmental tasks, such as dressing, feeding, supervising and washing the children. Women did an average of 78% more childcare than men when the children were under 5.[33] Not only have women's childcare responsibilities increased, but the interruptions they face when working have risen – with significant implications for their productivity.[34] One study has found that mothers are interrupted significantly more often than fathers while they undertake paid work during the pandemic. 'Not only are mothers less likely to work during the lockdown, but also, even if they are working, they spend fewer hours on paid work and the time they do spend working is likely to be less productive than fathers' work time because of interruptions' the authors suggest.[35] As an article in *The New York Times* put it, children 'go to mommy first'.[36]

This, of course, centres on two-parent heterosexual families. Lone parents have faced enhanced challenges: single parents are gone to first, every time.[37] During the isolation of the pandemic, single parents were their children's entire world. As Sarah Hopwood, a PhD student and a single mother of a toddler, has written of her experience in lockdown, 'My reproductive labour is of no use to the university. It won't transcribe the 60 hours of interviews I have, it won't write 80,000 words, it won't pass me my viva, it won't get me a great job when I finish my PhD, it won't bring in the next grant for the university,

or make me a successful statistic for their latest shiny re-branding brochure.' As she notes, however, this reproductive labour is vital. It 'is necessary for the continuation of society, it is vital for future generations and it is paramount to our survival.'[38]

The professional consequences of this childcare burden have the potential to be far-reaching. Within academia, there is anecdotal evidence that the pandemic has disproportionally affected women's ability to publish, with journals noting fewer submissions from women but not from men.[39] Early studies seem to bear this out.[40] Anxiety about the consequences are, at least, being aired: 'Covid-19 is threatening progress by amplifying existing gender disparities' a letter in *The Lancet* recently argued.[41] Of course, while these gendered trends play out on a wider scale, individual families have negotiated different patterns, and some academic fathers have taken on the childcare burden. [42] In response to an email survey I circulated to academic colleagues with children in preparation for this article a lecturer and father of one reflected that the bulk of childcare fell to him as his partner was a key worker. 'I was lucky that my teaching load was relatively low for this period, but this meant that I simply wasn't able to devote as much time to my job as I needed to. Corners had to be cut, and less progress was made with longer-term projects', he suggested.[43] Another History lecturer and father of two admitted that 'Balancing academic work with home-schooling (state-school) a Yr2 child has been nearly impossible. Exhausting and stressful. One is doing two jobs at once'. In common with other respondents, he commented that 'In term-time, weekday mornings have been filled with home-schooling. Academic work is squeezed in around this and made-up in afternoons and evenings. So the day does not end… Academic work requires thinking space; there's little to none to be had during lockdown.'[44] This loss of thinking space is vital. In the humanities, where the gestation periods for research are long, and require extended periods of reading, reflection and writing, the differentiated impact of the pandemic on parents and those with caring responsibilities is likely to play out slowly, in ways that the management structures may soon lose interest in and patience with. The anxiety is that we will be expected to just catch up in the longer term. The demands have been significant. As a female professor notes, 'The key challenge has been finding the emotional, intellectual & physical energy to teach/do academic work in the morning, home school & manage household in the early afternoon, and then resume academic work in the late afternoon & evening.'[45] As a lecturer in Psychology and mother of a young child reflected, 'there has been a LOT of teaching work to do to prep for online education next term… there is a lot of additional work due to Covid, and this is coming in at the same time as me having reduced time and availability.'[46]

However, the loss of research time and emotional costs will be most harmful for the many academics on precarious contracts and those who occupy a minoritized status within the academy. This constitutes an enormous number of scholars. The 37,000 teaching staff on fixed-term contracts at UK universities are likely to have been particularly hard hit by the labour-intensive shift to online teaching, and by the financial and professional uncertainty imposed by the pandemic.[47] Scholars of colour face substantial levels discrimination and harassment within the academy. They are likely to have enhanced demands to perform additional administrative labour around diversity and inclusion, as well be expected to support students of colour.[48] As a recent Royal Historical Society report into race has highlighted, History departments – and the academy more generally – remain overwhelmingly white. There are few Black academics at professorial level, and there is a pay gap between white and BME academic staff.[49] Precarious scholars of colour are likely to have experienced the most harm during the pandemic, and scholars of colour on fixed-term contracts and with children will have faced significant pressures. The removal of formal and informal support networks has therefore had important implications. These implications are most disruptive for the most vulnerable and this is likely, where relevant, to have been exacerbated by the absence of childcare. In February 1978 feminist, writer and psychologist Phyllis Chesler wrote that 'The childcare problem: *it exists.* The childcare solution: it doesn't'.[50] For precarious academic parents this feeling was redoubled during the pandemic.

Conversely, however, online teaching and digital meetings had the effect of making domestic labour more visible than before (my daughter played a starring role in several department Zoom meetings; my cat made guest appearances in online seminars; the baby and I featured in the background of a number of my partner's Civil Service meetings). This gives both colleagues and students an insight into the juggling act being performed but also a glimpse of our personal spaces. This tension – between physical isolation and the private made visible – was commented on by academic parents. As one female historian with a young child noted, the shift to the digital constituted a 'dissolution of personal and professional boundaries'. The lockdown had confirmed her preference for working outside the house: 'I feel "on" all the time', she observed, and the proliferation of online meetings meant that 'they can "get at me" at home

now, without regard to my own timetables and juggling of responsibilities.'[51] For other academic parents the move to online work provided evidence to push back against some of the demands of the academy. An academic father of two said that the shift to online meetings had the potential to provide relief in family life, suggesting that 'The realisation that things like departmental meetings, boards etc can be done online/remotely will be a great time-saver and provides important flexibility for working parents.'[52] Others agreed. An Oxford-based lecturer and father of three commented on the flexibility provided by working at home and admitted to being surprised at how readily academics had adapted to online teaching.[53] As a female lecturer with an 18 month old baby wrote, 'We've all illustrated that we can work from home fine. So I feel more militant about insisting I get judged by the outputs I produce rather than the hours I spend in the office.'[54] The presence of school-age children could be a mixed blessing: one London-based father of two found himself sharing his workspace with his children: 'Kids elected to work at my desk for home-schooling, so they were/are a fairly constant presence. At one level, the constant juvenile scrutiny worked quite well as I felt that I needed to set some kind of scholarly and diligent example. At second level, I quickly found myself adopting their worst habits including pausing work to play work to battlecats or get involved in some petty squabble.'[55]

The physical space of the office came to feel increasingly removed from me as the lockdown weeks crept by. Spaces set aside for work in the house came to show evidence of our new, blended life: a desk drawer houses a stuffed rabbit; a tiny sock acts as a bookmark; brightly coloured plastic balls nestle against journal articles. Perhaps less expected was the realisation that parenthood is profoundly auditory. Baby laughs, cries, babbles, as well as the constant chatter of parenting ('let's find your shoes! Have you found your shoes? Oh, you've found your shoes! Let's put your shoes on!') float through the house and settle around work notes. These incursions were often as lovely as they were maddening. Mixed in with the frustrations of combining paid work with domestic life was profound pleasure at spending time with our daughter at such a delightful time of her life – something other academic parents commented on, too. As one academic father of three noted 'It's a generally pleasant if not peaceful working environment… the kids routinely have me in fits of laughter throughout the day.'[56] The sound of domestic life is not defined by the sound of a child, however. As members of the women's movement of the 1970s recognised – and some formalised in campaigns such as Wages for Housework – it is not just childcare that is work, but housework too. Housework, in all its tedium, became an endless task for my partner and I during lockdown. If a future historian seeks to conduct an auditory history of the domestic experience of the virus in Britain, I would urge them to foreground the sound of a washing machine.

The hum of domestic life could only be overwhelmed by the hum of anxiety during lockdown. Some of this was, of course, about the wellbeing of children themselves. The absence of schooling was a cause of concern. A female history professor shared via email 'how little the experience of teaching undergraduates prepared me for home schooling my own children', while a male history professor and father of teenagers reflected that 'lockdown has not been too bad for doing our jobs but it's been an absolute disaster for the kids' education.'[57] Another academic father similarly noted the importance of schooling; 'Having school-age children at home 24/7 is a sharp reminder of how important school is as social/emotional space, both for primary and secondary school children.'[58] Younger children, too, missed out on formative experiences. A London-based lecturer and father of a toddler suggested that 'the biggest challenges were for our daughter, who was stuck in a one bed flat with two stressed parents, she couldn't see any of her friends, and none of the usual activities were available.'[59] A London-based mother of a primary school-aged child reflected on the challenges of managing her child's emotions and shielding them from panic and pressure during the lockdown.[60] While Covid-19 entrenched experiential divisions between those with caring responsibilities and those without, experiences were also delignated by the children's ages: those with younger children may have had fewer opportunities to outsource respite to video games or television, while older children's education was more likely have been disrupted and were more likely to be sensitive to the fraught atmosphere created by the pandemic.[61]

Other anxieties concerned matters on a more global scale. The distrust of expertise that underpinned the inability of some governments to take effective action to stem the spread of the virus was a cause of near despair. The institutionalised, violent racism shown by George Floyd's murder in America – and the repressive response to the Black Lives Matter protests across the globe – opened up questions about the world we are raising our children in. The extent to which the pandemic exacted a disproportionate toll on the Black community and Asian communities in Britain highlighted the structural inequalities and racism British universities are surrounded by and are sometimes complicit in. These profound, important issues were a reminder of the world beyond the absorbing minutiae of the intimate and the domestic. Deep in

lockdown, scholars returned to syllabuses, already being reworked for the shift to online teaching, in the hope of foregrounding some of the social justice issues raised.

Discussions between academics about the spread of the virus, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the shift to online teaching were all enabled by social media. The lockdown meant that the (often fractious) community of Twitter became newly important to me as a means of plugging into adult conversation. For all its flaws, I found academic twitter to be a forum for sharing jokes, complaints, pictures of sourdough loaves, and pedagogical advice during the lockdown. It emerged as a mechanism that had the potential to actively undermine the competitive culture fostered by institutional rankings and metrics. Academics from across institutions shared generous tips for teaching online. Lists of resources were compiled and spread. For academic parents, social media enabled howls of frustration to be aired. It was a reminder that we were not juggling alone. While it was sometimes home to testy debates about who had it harder, parents or non-parents during lockdown, social media can also be a space for solidarity. And solidarity is needed. As one academic father observed, 'The parent/non-parent binary can't capture other differences in experience (around gender, race, disability, other care responsibilities, and so on) and I think failing to recognise that and also shared aspects of our experiences as academics generally is detrimental to solidarity we so desperately need at this difficult time.'[62]

Conclusions

It seems likely that the pandemic will bring long-lasting consequences for British universities. In the short-term – although predicting anything is necessarily speculative – it looks as though teaching in the autumn term of 2020 will take a markedly different form to that which is familiar to almost all British higher education institutions (the Open University is a notable exception to this). Mastering online teaching will become essential for most, if not all, teaching staff. Masks and social distancing are likely to become commonplace on campuses across the country. For those with reasons to shield, venturing into the physical spaces of the academy is likely to be fraught, if not impossible. Attempts to reconcile tensions between preventative, protective measures and the perceived demands of the student body, as well as the likelihood of a 'second wave', will have implications for most academics. As a father reflected, 'Academia, like most other industries, pays considerable lip-service to staff (working-parent) well-being, but the reality is that the priority is student retention, well-being and satisfaction.'[63] For those with caring responsibilities the uncertain horizon breeds anxiety. For the majority of academic parents, the ways schools and nurseries will navigate the coming few months remains opaque. Without clarity around childcare it is difficult to plan for the coming year. It seems that academic parents will not be unshackled from unpredictable domestic responsibilities and implacable professional expectations in the near future. Some academics will be questioning their future in the face of the changes imposed by management structures. Those on precarious contracts are likely to see prospects of financial and career security diminish. The academy – already predicated upon the assumption of the footloose, responsibility-free academic, able to uproot to the next contract without looking back – is likely to become, in the short-term at least, a more hostile place for those with caring obligations.

That may well read as a pessimistic interpretation. There are, perhaps, reasons for academic parents to be hopeful: perhaps the pandemic has made care work performed by members of the academy more visible; perhaps parents have practiced asserting their needs more vocally, and this will auger an enduring culture shift; perhaps the lockdown will build new communities. In the 1970s Adrienne Rich wrote that 'It is difficult to imagine, unless one has lived it, the personal division, endless improvising, and creative and intellectual holding back that for most women accompany the attempt to combine the emotional and physical demands of parenthood and the challenges of work. To assume that one can naturally combine these has been a male privilege everywhere in the world.'[64] During the pandemic of 2020 the extent to which the academy chooses to not acknowledge the constraints imposed by care work was thrown into sharp relief. The privilege of ignorance was removed. It therefore presents an opportunity – should we choose to seize it – to remake the working cultures that demand the unmanageable from mothers and fathers.

[1] Children are not the only relevant caring responsibility. A significant number of workers (particularly women) provide unpaid care for elderly parents and grandchildren. Office for National Statistics, Living Longer: Caring in Later Working Life, 15 March 2019, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/articles/livinglongerhowourpopulationischangingandwhyitmatters/2019-03-15#who-is-providing-unpaid-care. Due to lack of space, however, this viewpoint article will focus on academics parenting dependent children. 'Parents' is used in this article to denote those in a parenting role.

[2] In preparation for this article I circulated an email with six questions about lockdown as an academic parent to twelve academic colleagues and academic friends with children. The majority, but not all, are historians. These academics are at institutions across Britain and at various career stages, from the professoriate to precariously employed early career researchers. Their children range from six months to sixteen years old.

[3] Cornelius Hirsch, 'Europe's Coronavirus Lockdown Measures Compared', Politico.Eu, 31 March 2020, accessed online 17 July 2020 https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-coronavirus-lockdown-measures-compared/.

[4] The nursery has still not reopened at the time of writing (July 2020). The last email indicated that this may be in September.

[5] 'UCU Announces 14 strike days at 74 UK universities in February and March' 3 February 2020,accessed 17 July 2020 https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10621/UCU-announces-14-strike-days-at-74-UK-universities-in-February-and-March. This strike followed widespread strikes in 2018 and 2019.

[6] Charles Franklin Emerick, 'College Women and Race Suicide', *Political Science Quarterly*, 24, no. 2 (1909), 269-83.

[7] Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities 1870-1939* (London: UCL Press, 1995), 2.

[8] Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, (London: Collins Classics, 2014), 140.

[9] Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 269.

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