

Expected to be mother: Women's experiences of academic employment

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Abstract

For women academics, the gendered university places expectations not experienced by their male colleagues. In particular, scholarly literature includes many instances of expectations that female scholars, especially those in management roles, will take on a motherly role within the academy. These occur even in female-dominated professions such as social work. This paper identifies four groups within the university who expect women academics to adopt a mothering role: students, staff and colleagues, senior management, and women themselves. This paper draws together this literature in the hope that it brings into public some of the often covert expectations experienced by many female academics, and argues that gender equity cannot be achieved while expectations of mothering remain unrecognised.

Keywords: academic management, gender equality, higher education, mothering, social work

1. Introduction

Some years ago, an international PhD student in social work at Edinburgh University said to Professor Vivienne Cree 'I'd like to call you my mother' (Cree, 2012, p.451). Around this time, at a training session for a group of social workers in England, one participant is reported to have stated 'I once knew a team where all the workers called the manager "mother"' (Ward, 2013, p.108). While both of these comments seemed to be throwaway comments that made for a memorable title of an article about topics other than mothering, as the manager of a university social work programme, there have been times when I have been aware of implicit expectations that I would be "mother" who would care for her brood and resolve their problems.

The gendering of academic life perhaps first becomes apparent to female aspirants in the realisation that their desired achievement is to become a bachelor, master or fellow. Traditionally, academic excellence and the privileges this bestows, has often been aligned with being male (van den Brink, Benschop and Jansen, 2010). When Jocelyn Hyslop stepped down as the first head of the social work program at

the University of Melbourne in the mid 1940s, she reportedly advised the program be located in a department under a "really first rate man" (Miller, 2016, p.14). While an organisational motto of "Let us be men!" (Kwesiga and Ssendiwala, 2006, p.595) may no longer be deemed appropriate, the experience of many female academics attest to such sentiments living on. In Australia, which is where I work, the percentage of Australian academics who are female is among the highest in the world (Aiston and Jung, 2015). Australia's first female vice chancellor was appointed in 1986 (Winchester and Browning, 2015), and having women in such senior roles is now an expectation in Australian universities (White, Bagilhole and Riordan, 2012). Yet even being a vice chancellor did not protect one female academic from being mistaken for a waitress at a professional event (Cotterill, Jackson and Letherby, 2007).

Senior women in the academy have long been expected to fulfil both professional and gendered roles associated with caregiving not expected of their male counterparts (Perriton, 1999). Joan Eveline, formerly at University of Western Australia, has written of "ivory basement leadership" which she defines as:

... the essential labour that underpins academic research, teaching and administration, the unspoken rules and values that create inequitable rewards and spaces, and the unrecognised forms of leadership that people enact in those spaces. To that end, the metaphor of the ivory basement is used not simply to signify structural inequalities but, most crucially, as a symbol of the relational work that is hidden, ignored and unseen. (Eveline, 2004, p.4)

Also referred to as ‘institutional housekeeping’ (Bird, Litt and Wang, 2004, p.198) and ‘academic housework’ (Heijstra, Steinthorsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017, p.765), one of the ironies of ivory basement leadership is that because relational work is often not recognised, for some women it is a way of managing in which they can maintain control (Eveline, 2004). While it is acknowledged that for some female academics, adopting the role of mother may align with their preferences for roles and responsibilities within the workplace, for others the role is thrust upon them and it is a struggle to overcome these gendered expectations (Ramsay and Letherby, 2006). In particular, they report being ‘excluded from research activities and ... locked into departmental maintenance activities’ (Thomas and Davies, 2002, p.381) and leading on gender equality initiatives (Heijstra, Steinthorsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2017).

The invisibility of women’s contributions is particularly evident in university finances, where ‘gender budgeting ... sustains gender inequality in academia’ (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019, p.125). An individual, often male, academic who brings in a large research grant can expect public adulations and, in some institutions, financial bonuses in addition to their contracted incomes. In contrast, despite the considerable efforts required to recruit and retain students and the substantial fee income which students bring into the academy, the rewards for female academics involved in student recruitment are minimal (Bird, Litt and Wang, 2004). At a time when student recruitment is increasingly promoting opportunities for work integrated learning, the placing of students in organisations tends to be undertaken by female staff. Despite being ‘a difficult, time consuming job which demands a degree of tact, organisational ability and diplomacy, often held to be “female” characteristics’ (Cree, 1997, p.43), the holders of such positions often regard their responsibilities to be damaging their career prospects.

It has been proposed that the gendering of roles within universities is more pronounced in disciplines attracting high numbers of female staff such as health and human services disciplines than in the fields of science and technology (Deem, 2003; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019). While there is no evidence

which suggests that female academics in the health and human services are in fact more caring than their colleagues in other disciplines, expectations to take on mothering roles may be more pervasive. This paper draws together literature on gendered expectations in the academy in the hope that it brings into public some of the often covert expectations experienced by many female academics, particularly in fields such as social work. In particular, this paper explores what ‘mothering’ means in the academy and how it negatively impacts on the careers of female academics.

2. Methodology

I attempted a library search to explore the issues of how women academics are expected to take on mothering roles within their place of employment, but this revealed literature on the topic of women who are mothers and their experiences of working in the academy (e.g. Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2018). However, although not readily identified using bibliographic search tools, over a number of years I have collected fragments of literature when reading broader discussions about gender roles.

If the method of locating literature is unconventional, so too was the inspiration for making sense of it, which came from reading a 1930s crime fiction set in a Cambridge college (Patrick, 1932/2012). At a time when women were not allowed to graduate from Cambridge, there was nevertheless a designated role for women in the academy. These were domestic staff, known as ‘bedders’, who acted as mother to the boys and male academic staff in their care.

[For] many of the upper-class students (and masters and fellows) who attended Cambridge in the first half of the twentieth century ... the women who roused them from sleep and instructed them in how to do everything from dressing properly to combing their hair and tying their shoelaces, and who kept their living quarters habitable, were exotic, strange and the only faintly maternal presence in an otherwise lonely and paternalistic environment. (Seymour, 2016, p.4)

If expectations of a maternal presence are not confined to one group within the academy, initially I sought to identify expectations separately for students and staff, being open to the possibility of other holders of maternal expectations being present. Rather than establishing a definition of mothering and seeking examples from the literature which matched this definition, this paper sought to explore how women in the academy understood ‘mothering’ as a component of their work and the impacts this had on their careers.

3. Findings

If female academics are experiencing expectations that they will adopt a mothering role, addressing such expectations requires an understanding as to whom they are coming from. In fact, it would appear that these expectations are coming from a range of sources including students, staff and colleagues, university management, and from female academics. Each of these will now be discussed in turn.

3.1 Expectations from students

Expectations of gendered parenting in the natal family, in which the female acts as care giver in contrast to the male disciplinarian, may be unconsciously projected by adults into learning and work environments (Schrader McMillan and Paul, 2011). Similarly, for some female academics, taking on a maternal role may be their inclination and one which offers positive rewards (Cree, 1997).

While being called 'mother' can be a sign of respect for female academics, its usage can also signify expectations of 'someone who looks after you, but more than this, looks *out* for you' (Cree, 2012, p.456). Hence, not only may students make more demands on the mother-academic but also place expectations on them that they would not apply to other members of the academy (Cree, 1997). For example, it has been reported by some female academics that the mothering role included being expected to nurse students through their classes by making allowances for the fact they had been up much of the night drinking (Quinn, 2007). If this sounds extreme, a recent study of social work academics in the US found that approximately half felt that students expected an opportunity to make up for an exam irrespective of the reason it was not taken (Gates, Heffernan and Sudore, 2015). The same study found that approximately two-thirds of academics perceived that struggling students expected the staff member to proactively offer them assistance rather than them having any responsibility to seek help for themselves.

Expectations that female academics will adopt the role of mother to their students are likely to be increased in the so-called caring professions where students may confuse the roles of both academic/carer with student/service users or patient (Hafford-Letchfield, 2007). When 'mother-academic' fails to live up to the expectation of her students, she may be harshly treated. In the short-term, 'students would become upset when their caring teacher found it necessary to emphasize standards or take a critical stance' (Acker and Feuerwerker, 1996, p.413), and in the longer term may be punished for not seeming caring enough by harsher student evaluations (Hay, 2016).

Finally, students who project onto their female teachers a maternal role, may fail to make appropriate acknowledgement of the academic credentials of female compared to male staff (Reynolds, 2009) and thus be perceived as being disrespectful even if that is not the student's intention (Graham, 2013). In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, Carol Hay (2016) wrote about the dilemmas of being a female professor noting 'I'm not their mother. ... If I were to serve as their mother, I'd have only compassion and unconditional acceptance to offer, not intellectual lessons'. Others have made the same point (Graham, 2013).

Unless taught alternate strategies (Morley and Dunstan, 2013), the potential for projecting a maternal role may well be greater for students in courses such as social work, in which they must engage in regular critical reflection as part of practice learning (Savaya and Gardner, 2012) or where entrance involves a frank interview about their life history compared to students whose entry is based on documents, with privileging of academic transcripts (Crisp and Gillingham, 2008).

3.2 Expectations from staff/ colleagues

In university environments where students expect their teachers to act as parents who provide support, junior staff may have similar expectations of support from more senior staff whom they perceive as having the necessary knowledge and competence to fulfil their roles (Layton and McKenna, 2016). Given that new staff must very quickly learn new systems and are handling difficult situations in their work on a regular basis, expectations of support often have some legitimacy (Ward, 2013) but while mentoring is important, it is different from mothering (Odejide, Akanji and Odekunle, 2006). Provision of support alongside a parenting discourse contributes to a culture in which those more junior in the institution are regarded as having deficits and in need to remedial assistance (Layton and McKenna, 2016).

Women managers sometimes report having slipped into maternal roles (Prichard and Deem, 1999) but subsequently recognising that being supportive can involve challenging individuals to take responsibility and control over situations (Pettersen, 2012). As one female head of department commented:

So I didn't give them the ability to think for themselves if you like, which is what I should have done, um, it wasn't good for them and it wasn't good for me ... of course I realised that I had not given them the space and had probably mothered them too much. ... yes I suppose I did mother them too much. At first I think they needed that, I think they needed

to come to terms with that and I don't ever want to take away the caring attitude they have got for the students. (in Prichard and Deem, 1999, p.336)

Expectations from male colleagues that females will disproportionately take on caring roles are often strong (James, 2010). For instance, female senior staff sometimes report finding themselves in the role of 'unofficial faculty counsellor' (Bagilhole and White, 2008, p.7) for older male staff who would never make such requests for counselling to their male colleagues. Often however, females take on caring roles that their male colleagues have opted out of (Deem, 2003). That many women take on these roles does not necessarily mean they do so by choice but out of a sense of responsibility, i.e. 'because the others are not doing it and because we know it needs to be done' (O'Connor, 2015, p.311).

3.3 Expectations from university management

Workload allocations can result in university management colluding with, if not actually promoting, the notion that caring roles should disproportionately be done by female staff:

When I first joined the team I am now in, my manager said to me, "they really need you in the team because they need someone who will look after the students". What he meant was, "you can do all the running around while the men get on with their research and build up their careers". ('Rachel' in Ramsay and Letherby, 2006, p.38)

Other female academics report experienced management expectations that they will take care of housework tasks such as organising catering when such requests were not made of male counterparts (Acker and Dillabough, 2007). Thus, caring, while essential for the maintenance of the organisation, is nevertheless perceived of being relatively unskilled work and those who perform it as having been among the less competent (Bailyn, 2003; Cuddy, Fiske and Glick, 2004), even when the evidence would suggest otherwise (Monroe et al., 2008).

The 'greedy organisation' demands allegiance and commitment from its staff but can readily exploit them (Rasmussen, 2004). Female academics have reported that they are 'expected to place the organization at the centre of our emotional lives and extend our mothering capacity to our students, colleagues and to the greedy institution' (Ramsay and Letherby, 2006, p.40). Furthermore, universities expect their staff to do what it takes to ensure student satisfaction and provide care as required in order to retain students (Hafford-Letchfield, 2007). Like a good parent, this includes putting up with bad behaviour from students (Hay, 2016; Lee, 2005).

In other words, despite being essential, mothering is not treated as real work (Thomas and Davies, 2002). Yet universities need to position themselves so that they are perceived as being gender inclusive (Lihamba, Mwaipopo and Shule, 2006; Odejide, Akanji and Odekunle, 2006), whether or not they are in practice (Shackleton, Riordan and Simonis, 2006). But even when women reach the senior executive levels, the work may still be somewhat gendered and it is not uncommon to find 'there is at the executive level a gendered division of labour between the 'domestic' (internally oriented) roles of change management, teaching and learning and 'public' (externally oriented) organisational roles such as research, finance, partnerships and global engagement' (Blackmore and Sawers, 2015, p.322).

Gendered expectations may actually become more accentuated as women are promoted into senior positions (Monroe et al., 2008). Where there are few women in senior roles, expectations that committees will include female members can be burdensome for the women involved (Kjeldal, Rindfleish and Sheridan, 2005), particularly if in addition to their membership of a committee they are expected to provide a maternal presence.

3.4 Expectations from women academics

In addition to the expectations they experience from others, female academics often have their own expectations about the place of maternal roles in the academy, which may be carried over from expectations of women's mothering roles outside the university (Harley, 2003). For instance, there are some senior women academics who have chosen to take on roles of responsibility such as head of school/department or associate dean positions in order to try and make it easier for subsequent generations of female scholars (Wyn, 1997). Others may direct their attentions to the needs of students who are the first in their families to attend university (McKay and Devlin, 2014).

Rather than using their positions to nurture future generations of students and staff, so-called 'successful' women leaders in higher education sometimes report feeling they need to leave part of their identities off campus so as to fit into the ascribed roles (Enke, 2014). In particular, women may perceive that becoming or being the successful female professor requires sacrificing what it means to be a woman, or what it means to be human such as relationships, health and parenthood, although no male professor is ever asked to do this (Reynolds, 2009). In fact, to become an academic at any level, women may actually have to be the less than perfect mother in their domestic context (Lenette, 2012). The extent to which female academics are willing to adjust their identities

or make additional sacrifices to reach senior roles is unknown but probably serves as a deterrent or obstacle to future generations of female leaders.

4. Discussion

The data reported here is anecdotal, which limits the extent to which the data can be extrapolated. Also, some of the data is quite old and during the 21st century there have been improvements in the positioning of female academics in many countries (Eggins, 2017). Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the extent to which female academics feel compelled to take on maternal roles varies between institutions (Ely and Meyerson, 2010), disciplines (Deem, 2003) and even within the same department (Cree, 1997). Black female academics in the US feel particularly burdened by maternal expectations and are acutely aware of the consequences of rejecting this role (Covington-Ward, 2013; Jordan-Zachery, 2013). Whether or not it is widespread, it is nevertheless an issue which is too often not spoken about and affected individuals are left to struggle in silence with both the immediate impact (e.g. lower pay, less likely to be tenured) and longer-term consequences (e.g. lack of career advancement) of working in universities which are gendered in ways too rarely acknowledged (Morley, 2005).

Expectations of mothering are not only projected onto female academics but on many women, who hold leadership roles traditionally reserved for men. This includes female leaders of nations such as Michelle Bachelet who has recently reflected on being called mother when she was President of Chile:

In fact, people were so fond of me they would call me “Mummy”. Originally, I thought this was negative, but I came to understand the point they were making. They were saying, “She’s our mother because she protects us, she wants us to get out of poverty”. So in that sense it was not a bad thing. (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala, 2020, p.180)

For new students, the university is often an incredibly complex, if not incomprehensible, organisation which is difficult to navigate. If one’s experience of the world has been that a mother figure is who guides you through such situations, projecting maternal expectations onto females who appear to know their way around is somewhat understandable. However, it is possible for women to provide care without becoming mother figure (Crisp and Fox, 2014).

The findings reported in this paper are consistent with recent US research which found that female social work academics were significantly less financially rewarded for taking on administrative duties. Women with administrative

roles were remunerated at the same level as their male colleagues who did not have these responsibilities (Tower et al., 2019). Hence, while as a profession social work might subscribe to the notion that women have a right not to be mothers (Liddell, 2019), this does not necessarily apply when responsibilities are allocated within the academy. Moreover, assuming academics who appear to be women identify as such may wrongfully assume male/female binaries in respect of gender.

While we have moved past the era in which motherhood, or even the anticipation of motherhood, resulted in expulsion from the workforce for many women, gendered expectations within workplaces often remain (Barnett, 2004). Increasing numbers of women in leadership provide no guarantee of gender equity within higher education institutions unless there is also a change of culture (Gunawardena et al., 2006). Nevertheless, achieving gender-based equity in the workplace remains a challenge, even when the organisation is committed to this (Seymour, 2009). The experience in universities which have ceased to have gender equity as an organisational aim has been a reduction in the proportion of females in leadership roles (O’Connor, 2017). Despite a wide range of affirmative action programs, policies and programs to ensure women feel safe on campus etc, sexism in higher education is deeply entrenched (Morley, 2006; Odejide, Akanji and Odekunle, 2006).

One of those points of danger are expectations that female academics will fulfil maternal roles within the institution to both students and staff, and in doing so that their male colleagues can be relieved of any requirements to take on so-called ‘caring’ or institutional housework roles (Barrett and Barrett, 2011). This is not that caring is not important, but rather if the work is so essential, it needs to be properly valued in both workload allocations and promotions criteria. Yet in many institutions, criteria for promotion success is often tied to gaining research grants and research outputs (Aiston and Jung, 2015; Winchester and Browning, 2015).

One of the most successful gender equity programs in higher education has been Athena SWAN. Initially arising out of concerns as to the status and career opportunities for women academic in science, technology, engineering, medicine, and mathematics (STEMM) disciplines, the scope of Athena SWAN has broadened to include other academic disciplines. It has also become concerned with gender equity in the broader workforce within higher education and research institutes, including professional, technical, and support staff as well as academic staff. While signing up to the Athena SWAN Charter is optional, the decision by some research funding bodies to only support grant applications from

accredited at higher than the lowest possible level of accreditation, is giving universities considerable incentive to change their organisational culture by addressing issues of gender inequity (Barnard, 2017).

While national and international programs such as Athena SWAN are making a difference for many women in higher education, at the local level, it is also important for women academics to have a network of female peers and mentors. These peers and mentors may enable sexism to become more apparent and needing to be addressed within their own institution. They do this by demonstrating that women can achieve tenure and promotion to senior positions within the organisation by providing encouragement and support for women to achieve their career goals. In addition to supporting individual women, networks of female peers and mentors have often achieved organisational change by proposing solutions to gender inequity within the university (O'Meara and Stromquist, 2015). Nevertheless, it is also necessary that efforts to achieve gender equity do not blame women for discrimination they face in the university system (Morley, 2006). For example, it has been proposed that women mentoring women places the problem of gender inequity with one gender only. Instead, all staff involved in recruitment, promotions committees and other processes which impact on professional trajectories need to be aware of the full range of skills which women in the university bring to their work. Furthermore, it is not appropriate to perpetuate gender biases through work allocations which assume caring roles are better undertaken by female staff (Aiston, 2011). Moreover, where caring results in student retention, the financial benefits of this to the university should not be under-estimated and should be recognised and rewarded in levels of pay, seniority and tenure commensurate with other work which brings financial reward and/or improves the reputation of the organisation.

It has been suggested that increasing numbers of women in senior academic positions has other benefits. Women in leadership roles tend to be more collegial, i.e. collaborative and engage in participatory decision making that is transformational. Arguably to not have women in leadership roles is potentially problematic for universities in the long term (Aiston, 2014). However, when expectations on female academics are unreasonable, such as playing a maternal role, they leave their positions, seeking out places of employment which will accept them for who they are (Elg and Jonnergård, 2003). This is particularly an issue in social work education where despite most students being female, a high proportion of academic social workers are male (Tower et al., 2019). At a time of generation change, with many social work academics having recently retired, or will be retiring in the next few years (Howard and Williams, 2017), it will be important not just to

find people who can fill vacancies but to reconsider how the work is configured to ensure that working in the academy is a good option for female social workers.

In highly feminised professions such as Social Work, it is also problematic if students finish their qualification with the belief that their career options are limited in comparison to their male counterparts. As such there has been increasing recognition of what has been termed 'implicit curriculum' which refer to the messages transmitted by the learning environment (Bogo and Wayne, 2013). In particular, it has been proposed that:

The profession of social work includes, as central values, the dignity and worth of the person and the importance of human relationships. It is therefore expected that these values will be demonstrated and reinforced in all educational venues and processes. (Bogo and Wayne, 2013, p.33)

Those of us who work in social work education and whose student experience was in programs where male staff held most of the senior positions and practice learning was the province of female staff, sometimes feel a responsibility to ensure the implicit curriculum of male seniority is not replicated in our current programs. The need for positive female role models (see Nzinga-Johnson, 2013) was reinforced the night I received my PhD in social work, when I was the only female among the eight graduates awarded a doctoral degree. After the ceremony, a female social work graduate commented that my presence that evening was the role modelling she needed to see. That is one aspect of implicit curriculum. Other aspects include the ways we work with students negotiate the many hurdles to achieving their qualifications and the ways in which we make explicit issues of gender in social work education and social work practice (Hosken, Vassos and Epstein, 2020).

New ways of working as women in the academy are emerging in female-dominated professions such as social work. In particular, both female scholars and all those we work with and for, require the capacity to 'imagine and enact socially just practice' (Epstein, Hosken and Vassos, 2018, p.8) which does not position women in maternal roles. Recognition of the caring work which women academics do also needs to be re-imagined, not as peripheral but critical to the success of the academy and the responsibility of the whole institution. This involves working from a human rights approach and modelling this way of working for our students as they prepare to enter the workforce:

Our own practice experience reveals the necessity to engage in administrative advocacy to support the goals of feminist social work pedagogy. Moreover,

this provides opportunity to model authentic administrative and organisational advocacy for social work students. Like social work academics, social work students on placement and once graduated, endeavour to enact socially just practice in organisations shaped within neoliberalism. (Hosken, Vassos and Epstein, 2020, p.10)

Until we are enabled to work in such ways, it is almost certain that female academics will continue to be frustrated by unfair expectations that they enact the role of mother in the workplace.

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