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The Care-full Obfuscations of UK Doctoral Students

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Abstract: This paper introduces the notion of care-full obfuscations via an analysis of UK doctoral students' experiences. As observed in personal experience and ongoing research into the transition to parenthood and/or desired parenthood amongst academics, care-full obfuscations arise when doctoral candidates shroud their caring responsibilities so as to be perceived as reliable, professional and competitive. One unintended consequence of such obfuscation is "strategic ignorance" (McGoey, 2012), where institutions - purportedly unaware of the needs of their students - act in ways that leave carers shouldering care responsibilities without appropriate support. From this, the paper turns attention to the ways in which doctoral programmes could become more accommodating, and whether doctoral students should have employment-like status in the UK with its associated parental benefits. Acknowledging the lack of empirical investigation into this area, the paper foregrounds a research pathway into the presence and possible resolution of care-full obfuscations.

Paper: I am 39 weeks pregnant and despite fielding false labour I am continuing with member checking, approving dissertation proposals and writing this abstract. Why? On the one hand, I am responding to the continuous pressure to perform as a PhD researcher. On the other hand, I am not using this time to bolster my CV as much as I am using it to play catch up. Between struggling with hyperemesis and pre-eclampsia concerns, my academic outputs have suffered greatly this past year. Awareness of the precarity that could follow such 'underperformance' has nonetheless inspired the obfuscation of these struggles. Wanting to appear competitive, I have emphasised successes, understated obstacles and borrowed more time than requested.

This experience of care-full obfuscation is not unique to me, however, and so to examine this phenomena further this paper draws from both personal reflections and my PhD research into the effects of the transition to parenthood and/or desired parenthood on academics' engagement with the norms of the contemporary academic labour. Thus far, 34 UK-based academics have participated in one-to-one online semi-structured interviews incorporating one of three creative elements (word association, placard design and body mapping). At the time of the interviews (early 2021), 14 participants (12 women, 2 men) were enrolled in doctoral study and a further five (3 women, 2 men) discussed their historic experience of combining parenthood with PhD research. A preliminary inductive analysis of these transcripts demonstrates that competitive conditions directly and indirectly encourage students to "hide" (participants 7, 12 and 18) the impact of caring

responsibilities on their doctoral studies. Indeed, while nine of the 19 relevant participants reported taking a formal break from study, moving from full to part time hours or applying for funding and/or submission extensions, seven implemented informal measures – such as reducing hours - without advising their institutions or supervisors.

Reasons for taking these informal measures included previous negative experiences in the university environment; belief that support would be unavailable; and fear of financial or reputational repercussions. With this in mind, I thus argue that the real or presumed absence of support structures works to frame care as a private matter, something to be cleanly separated from teaching and research. Not only does this deter carers from asking for help, thereby exceptionalising the presence of care in doctoral work, but it may also discourage reflection on the influence of care, limiting both the insights garnered through reflexive practices and pathways for future investigation. Further, Six of the participants who took informal measures were women, adding credence to Lendák-Kabók's (2020) observation that academic women negotiate work/life balance in micro ways and echoing Low and Martin's (2019) sentiment that: "Motherhood ... in academia particularly is periled with subtle forms of silencing ... the expectation that once a mother, you have learnt to care, and therefore can be with care and dedication to the work, that you can manage" (p.429). In a neoliberalised environment where PhD performance informs post-doctoral opportunities, care-full obfuscations like those described attempt to maintain an appearance of managing - competitiveness. However this comes at the risk of (re)creating the conditions for "strategic ignorance" (McGoey, 2012) within which the performance of PhD carers is examined without context, with these individuals - particularly women - then penalised in the academic labour market.

I do not assume that obfuscators are responsible for their own exclusion. Instead, I believe an awareness of these processes offers avenues for disruption. During interviews, 11 participants questioned whether the UK PhD programme should be considered a form of employment, raising issues relating to accountability, parental and sick leave and the inequalities of outcome that emerge from unanticipated disruption. Six also discussed how employment status would reduce the need to obfuscate: "I would be protected" (participant 8), "support would be a right not a privilege" (participant 6). At the same time, women and primary carers in the academic workplace still experience discrimination when seeking employment or promotion (Baker, 2016) and employment status may (re)produce unfavourable hierarchies between funded and self-funded students. Even so, the covid-19 pandemic has reiterated the vulnerability of those with additional responsibilities and there is an appetite to address these disparities (Pandemic PGRs, 2021). This paper therefore proposes further investigation into the possibilities surrounding the status of PhD work. Until discussions as to what the PhD could be are taken from the wistful to the intentional, and until the perceived need for care-full obfuscations is eradicated, the contributions and experiences of PhD carers will remain underestimated and, crucially, under-reported.

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