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‘Care-free at the top’? Exploring the experiences of senior academic staff who are caregivers (0397)

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Part 1: Abstract (150 words maximum)

In England as in other parts of the global North, the academic workforce has considerably transformed over the past decades (Leathwood & Read, 2009). Those with caring responsibilities now represent a significant presence in academia as in other sectors of employment (Carers UK, 2014). While extant literature informs the experiences of academic mothers, there is limited research on fathers and on academics with other types of caring responsibilities, particularly at senior level.

This paper draws on an eponymous research project funded by the SRHE (2018-2019), which explores the experiences of England-based senior academic carers. Informed, on a theoretical level, by post-structuralist feminist research and, on an empirical level, by a corpus of interviews conducted with senior academics with caring responsibilities, it explores some of the tensions experienced by this group at a level of the academic hierarchy described in previous work as ‘care-free’ (AUTHORS).

Part 2: outline (1000 words maximum)

In England as in other parts of the global North, the academic workforce has considerably transformed over the past decades (Leathwood & Read, 2009). As a result of the ageing and statistical feminisation of the academic workforce, an increasing proportion of academics are likely to juggle paid and care work (Carers UK, 2014; HESA, 2016). While extant literature informs the experiences of mothers who are academics, there is limited research on fathers and on academics with other types of caring responsibilities, particularly at senior level, despite a neoliberal context characterised by university practices and policies geared towards the care-free scholar (AUTHORS).

Both academia and the family have been described as ‘greedy institutions’ (Coser, 1974; Hays, 1996). Managing the demands of paid and care work is particularly challenging for those in senior academic jobs often characterised by heavy workloads and expectations of full availability. Senior academics also tend to be older than their early career counterparts and thus more likely to have complex caring responsibilities. Previous research on academic caregivers (AUTHORS) suggests that, at senior level, academic cultures can be particularly exclusionary for caregivers, with caring responsibilities described by one interviewee as ‘glossed over’. While this earlier project covered issues around *access* to senior positions, it did not focus on the experiences of those who had ‘made it’ to such levels and on how policies and practices play out in their experiences – something this paper endeavours to address.

The paper is underpinned by a theoretical framework drawing on sociological understandings of work and education informed by post-structuralist feminist theories (Ahmed, 1998). The use of the concepts of 'care order', 'care regime' and 'care practice' (AUTHORS) reflects a multi-level conceptualisation of the social world (Crompton, 1999; Le Feuvre, 2009) and draws on earlier distinctions between 'gender order', 'gender regime' and 'gender practice' (Connell, 1987; Matthews, 1984). This theoretical framework acknowledges the gendered (and possibly classed and raced) dimension of care work (Lynch, 2010), as women tend to be held responsible for this, both outside and inside academia (Acker & Armenti, 2004). The association of women with care work (Lynch et al, 2009) is likely to explain their under-representation in senior academic jobs but also calls for further research exploring the experiences of those women who 'make it' at senior level.

The research team conducted a review of the literature on academic identities and care work. We also interviewed 20 senior academics who are carers, based in a range of roles and institutions across England. For the purpose of this paper, 'carer' is understood in a broad sense, e.g. based on self-definition and including for example those who care for children or for other relatives, partners or friends who are elderly, disabled or in poor health. Likewise, 'senior academic' covers a range of positions and roles, including management and leadership and academic leadership roles. To reach out to a diverse sample of senior academics who often experience 'time famine', we opted to recruit participants through an open call broadly circulated through a range of professional networks and media, rather than for example through institutional case studies as we had done in previous studies of carers (e.g., AUTHORS). The recruitment of volunteers was closely monitored to ensure maximum diversity, particularly in relation to position, subject and institution, as well as gender and ethnicity, all of which have been shown to affect the production of academic identities (Clegg 2008; Deem 2003). Due to the centrality of gender in this project, we sought to interview equal numbers of men and women. Participants ranged from Senior Lecturers with leadership and management responsibilities to Vice Chancellors. The interviews were conducted by phone or Skype, recorded and professionally transcribed. They were subsequently subjected to a thematic content analysis using NVivo, with key themes derived from the original research questions, from the interview questions, and from the repeated readings of the transcripts.

The paper adopts a broad angle to explore how senior academics' dual status (as carers and as academics) play out in their experiences. We argue that, at this level of academia, care is covered with an invisibility cloak that keeps it away from the institutional academic gaze. We also argue that the negotiations or '*bricolages*' which take place 'behind the scene' on a micro-social level are highly context-dependent and, in particular, are closely related to the position and roles taken up in academia by participants, with for example considerable variations between a head of department and a research professor. This calls for further studies of higher education unpacking the 'senior academic' category. Linked to the invisibility and misrecognition of care at these levels of the academic hierarchy and to the micro-social practices and arrangements operating in these spaces, we also argue that the resources available to individuals in negotiating the conflicting demands of academic and care work are of paramount importance in allowing senior academics to maintain a care-free academic identity, especially as these appear reluctant to use the formal provision and policies available to them. Access to resources itself is framed by the power relationships which circulate in

HE and beyond, such as gender and class. Ultimately, we argue that, despite the privileges that come with occupying a senior academic position, social justice matters in multiple ways at this level of the academic hierarchy, first in relation to equality between carers and non carers, and second in relation to equality between carers, with women and academics from Black and Minority Ethnic and working-class communities more likely to struggle in their maintenance of a care-free senior academic identity.

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