

“If you’re doing this correctly, there is a cost”: an exploration of the work–family trade-offs of female academics in Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore how the gendered structures and expectations of neoliberal academic institutions inform and shape work–family trade-off considerations for women academics in Australia. It also sheds light on how these negotiations, and at times, the ensuing career or family gap, are experienced. In doing so, the paper deepens our understanding of the systematic barriers which do not only lead to gender inequalities in academia but also have broader individual and social implications.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory study is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews, which were thematically analysed to identify how female academics navigate the expectations associated with the ideal academic norm and their domestic family role while working in the gendered structures of Australian academia.

Findings – This study brings to the fore the significantly different career and family experiences of male and female academics in Australia. Male academics tended to progress autonomously, whereas women often made work–family trade-offs, including delaying or foregoing children and reported experiencing relationship strains. While the flexibility of academic work facilitated meeting family demands it also reduced personal time and rest and recovery.

Practical implications – An increase in the number of senior female academics is often considered an indication of increased gender equity in universities, but this metric does not acknowledge that career progression can come at a significant personal cost for some women. This study suggests that the careers of some women in academia may only be sustainable because of their personal work–family trade-offs or external support structures, through which they essentially conform to, rather than challenge, the gendered structures of academia. As such, it is important that these narratives and experiences are explored and recognised and ultimately lead to broader structural changes to drive more equitable outcomes.

Originality/value – While research exploring the career gap in academia is ample, the potential family gap for women academics has been largely ignored. As such, this paper makes an important contribution to contemporary knowledge on the work–family negotiations of women in Australian academia.

Keywords Careers, Women academics, Gendered vulnerabilities, Family gap, Work–family trade-offs, Standpoint theory, Gendered organisations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite a multitude of gender equity initiatives female academics continue to be underrepresented at senior classifications, not just in Australia (Department of Training, 2024), but also internationally in, for example, the UK (Santos and Dang Vhu Phu, 2019),



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New Zealand (Walker *et al.*, 2020) and The Netherlands (Bakker and Jacobs, 2016). As such, the experiences of women academics *within* academia's hegemonic masculine power structures, and the identified career gap, have been a topic of considerable research, policy intervention and debate over the past decades (Jones and Floyd, 2024). Oftentimes, an indicator of a university's gender equity initiatives and programs' success is expressed by the percentage representation of women in senior classifications (Winchester and Browning, 2015; Aiston and Fo, 2021). This approach, however, has been criticised for focusing solely on the career gap, which essentially only tells half a story. Specifically, this methodology appears to ignore the way in which an academic career may inform concessions at the interface between work and family, or the potential *family gap*, for female academics. Recognising the increased focus on the interrelationship between work and personal lives (Mason *et al.* (2013) emphasised that research into the career outcomes of female academics should also consider the associated family outcomes. The aim of this paper is therefore to explore the impact an academic career may have on the personal lives of women academics in Australia through the lens of the gendered organisation (Acker, 1990), while also drawing on the notion of gendered vulnerabilities (Butler, 2016).

According to Butler's extensive work on the topic, gender is not internal, but rather created through the repetitive performance of acts, gestures and desires evident on the surface of the body (Jenkins and Finneman, 2018). The performance is informed and reinforced by societal expectations, and the performative aspect of gender subsequently predates the doer (Butler, 1990). This study adopts the standpoint that higher education institutions inform acts of gender and, in doing so, place women academics in positions of vulnerability (Butler, 1990; Mahabeer *et al.*, 2018; Franken *et al.*, 2024). Acker (1990), in her seminal work, referred to such organisations as gendered. She argues that these organisational cultures and structures are pervaded by deeply embedded gendered expectations, which are reproduced by vertical and horizontal segregation patterns (Acker, 1990). This paper posits that these gendered vulnerabilities (Butler, 1990), shaped by the gendered workplace (Acker, 1990), have ramifications far into female academics' social lives (Ayyildiz and Banoglu, 2024). Specifically, they may drive women to engage in trade-off negotiations between their work and personal lives.

In Australia, the increasing neoliberalisation and marketisation of higher education with its focus on efficiency and productivity in line with new public management (NPM; Shin and Jung, 2014), has resulted in, what has been described as the "toxic" (Gill, 2013) and "careless" (Lynch, 2010) nature of contemporary academic culture. These changes have further intensified gender inequities, thereby increasing women's vulnerabilities and disadvantages in the academic context. In addition, despite gender equity rhetoric and awards, such as the Athena scientific women's academic network (SWAN) initiative and accreditation expectations across the industry, research suggests that universities engage in genderspinning and genderwashing. When genderwashing, institutions display their efforts to achieve gender equality through appropriating the equality, diversity and inclusion narrative, while masking inherently biased promotion and remuneration practices (Fox-Kirk *et al.*, 2020). Genderspinning, however, refers to universities presenting a favourable impression to stakeholders while moving in endless circles (Howe-Walsh *et al.*, 2024). Such symbolic, rather than genuine, gender equity practices do not change the gendered structures of academia, nor do they practically facilitate the combination of work and family for women academics. In Australia, an academic career spans across five levels: A (associate lecturer), B (lecturer), C (senior lecturer), D (associate professor) and E (professor). And, despite decades of gender equity programs, female academics constitute the majority of academics employed at Level B, but are increasingly underrepresented from Level C. In view of the persistent structural

inequalities despite its progressive gender policies, Australia offers a compelling context to study the careers of female academics.

Indeed, in this hegemonic context (Ayyildiz and Banoglu, 2024) the ideal academic has been described as “masculine” and “disembodied” (Ollilainen, 2020, p. 1), highlighting the extraordinary personal commitment required to pursue an academic career. Overall, the context of academia is recognised as masculinised and characterised by “control, competitiveness, aggression, power and success” (Ahonen *et al.*, 2020, p. 450). This situation renders women particularly vulnerable when compared to the male norm which continues to dominate academic knowledge production (Fotaki, 2013; Górska, 2023). Recent research by Franken *et al.*, (2024) based on Butler’s notion of gendered vulnerabilities (1990) identified three key themes which capture the vulnerabilities as expressed by women academics working in Australian academia: the expectation paradox, the body and age and experience. The expectation paradox speaks to the conflict between the expectations associated with prescribed gender performativities, and those associated with an academic role. A woman’s body itself was also identified as a vulnerability, which women appeared to be, at least subconsciously, aware of as they made efforts to present it in a viable way through, for example, “putting on a mask” or the application of make-up and professional clothes. Franken *et al.*, (2024) furthermore found that age and experience appeared to lessen the pressure to be considered a viable and intelligible subject for the institution, with young and early career female academics particularly prone to the identified vulnerabilities. To participate in this work environment, these women may lose (or adapt) parts of themselves and resist their vulnerabilities in line with the prescribed organisational norms to advance their career (Franken *et al.*, 2024). This paper suggests that women’s adaptations to the ideal academic norm may not be limited to the workplace but have spillover effects through broader implications for their personal lives. This spillover has, to date, not been explored sufficiently.

To this end, it is important to look beyond the career gap by exploring what the family outcomes, or the potential *family gap*, of an academic career may be for women in Australian academia. The career outcomes, which have been widely researched, are only one aspect of female academics’ narratives. Gender equity, however, cannot comprehensively be assessed by the number of female academics at senior classifications because this approach does not consider any concessions women may make to reach these positions. By doing so, the potential private trade-offs female academics make, that male academics do not, to achieve senior positions are essentially disregarded, and an important dimension of women’s narratives and experiences is overlooked. The family outcomes associated with an academic career for women in Australia should therefore, in tandem, be considered an important measure of gender equity. This negotiation has been largely neglected in the literature of women in academia and will therefore be the focus of this study.

The remainder of this article is structured as follow. Firstly, a review of the literature considers the gendered nature of academia, and the ways in which these structures shape work–family trade-off considerations for women. The subsequent methods section introduces feminist standpoint theory, and the reflexive interpretivist approach adopted in the study. The findings are then presented and discussed, with particular attention to their theoretical and practical implications. Finally, directions for future research are proposed before the article concludes.

Gendered vulnerabilities in the academic context

This paper takes as its starting point the contention that academic institutions are gendered. This assertion aligns with feminist theorists, such as for example Acker (1990), who argued

that organisational cultures and structures are not gender neutral, but rather structured in ways that reflect and reinforce gender norms. Specifically, organisations not only possess a gendered foundation but also consistently recreate and reinforce gender divisions and practices through their structures and processes (Acker, 1990). As such, the social organisation of academic work increases the polarity between those who get ahead, and those who do not; essentially along gender lines (Lund, 2015). Acker (1990, p. 139) concurs and offered that the most powerful positions in organisations are mostly occupied by men, apart from “the occasional biological female who acts as a social male”. Similarly, Höpfl and Matilal (2007, p. 199) argued that “to succeed requires that a woman performs as a man. She ‘succeeds’ to the extent that she is able to compensate for her lack”.

Within these structures, women face a number of gaps, including the *leadership gap* (women are greatly underrepresented in the professoriate), a *salary gap* (female academics earn significantly less), a *funding gap* (women are significantly less successful in obtaining research grants) and a *resources gap* (female academics are found to have significantly less time, facilities and assistance for research) (Van Veelen and Derks, 2022). Little is known, however, how women negotiate employment in these structures with domestic demands and the *family gap* that may potentially ensue for women academics in Australia.

Academia in Australia

Over the past 20 years or more, the gendered dynamics of higher education in Australia have arguably become more pronounced due to the externally driven neoliberal corporatisation of universities. In Britain, this has been suitably referred to as the McDonaldisation of higher education (Hayes and Wynyard, 2016). Brown (2015) described neoliberalism as a distinctive mode of reasoning that conceptualises all facets of existence through an economic framework. As a result of Australia’s early adoption of new public management, universities were hence forth held to new standards and expected to focus on resource efficiency. Ferree and Zippel (2015, p. 561) referred to this as “academic capitalism” with a focus on managerial authority and economic accountability. This shift has deeply affected academia and academics (Berg and Roche, 1997; Castree *et al.*, 2006), as public good models of governance were replaced with individualised performance targets and incentives (Olssen, 2021). Specifically, an academic career is increasingly measured by research activity (Broadbent *et al.*, 2013). This quantification of an academic career has been argued to further devalue female academics’ contributions, such as teaching and service, thereby deepening gender inequity at universities. These trends may partially account for the persistent stagnation in gender equity progress, despite decades of reform efforts, as the growing commitment to NPM principles has effectively undermined these initiatives. Specifically, the heightened expectations increase women’s gendered vulnerabilities in academia, as well as potentially their work–family negotiations and trade-offs.

Work–family trade-offs

In the increasingly neoliberal university context with the disembodied ideal academic worker norm, the phenomenon of women as the other is typical (Bailyn, 2003). Care responsibilities and maternity are additional contributors to their other status (Moreau and Kemer, 2015). The pregnant body, the first indication of a woman’s impending motherhood, in an academic context is argued to disrupt the “masculine disembodied ideal academic worker norm” (Ollilainen, 2020, p. 961). It is not surprising, therefore, that in a study set in the USA, 25 women in a science graduate program were interviewed about their perceptions of an academic career, and the priorities and values which would influence their career intentions and choices (Canetto *et al.*, 2017). While most of the women indicated that a science career would be most fulfilling in terms of their interests and aspirations, they also felt that it required them, as women, to give up

on family life. Specifically, the perceived tension between the gendered expectation that the household and family are women's responsibilities, and the relentless focus required in a science career, informed their decisions to give up on academic-science careers. Similarly, in Germany, [Kemkes-Grottenthaler \(2003\)](#) found that most of the female academics in her sample ($n = 193$) perceived children to be an impediment to career advancement. Of the female academics in her sample, 66 had children, while 127 of the women were childless at the time of her survey. Of these 127 women, 14% had decided to forego children, 71% were postponing motherhood, 11% were undecided and the remainder were past their reproductive years.

Likewise, in a study conducted in the USA, [Mason et al. \(2013\)](#) found that female academics were more likely to make career sacrifices for their family, as well as family sacrifices for their career, than male academics. They were also more likely to be divorced and less likely to have children ([Mason et al., 2013](#)), while female academics with children were more likely to be single parents ([O'Laughlin and Bischoff, 2005](#)). According to [Baker \(2008\)](#), female academics who choose to combine motherhood with full-time academic work face immense challenges in terms of stress, hours and work-family conflict. For some women, this struggle becomes too much to bear, and they opt out of academia ([Ayyildiz and Banoglu, 2024](#); [Zemon and Bahr, 2005](#)). Others choose to trade marriage and motherhood for a successful academic career ([Baker, 2008](#)).

[Kahn's \(1964\)](#) concept of work-family conflict, describing it as the clash of multiple demands where fulfilling one obligation makes it harder to fulfil another, remains highly relevant today. Research has confirmed that having children is detrimental to an academic career, primarily for women. Not surprisingly, past studies in the USA have demonstrated that women who obtain a stable position in academia were more likely to be childless and single than male colleagues.

The identified family outcomes of female academics align with the declining birth rate in western countries. [Lampic et al. \(2006\)](#) warned that the choice to postpone having children may lead to involuntary childlessness because of declining fertility as individuals age. [Hewlett \(2018\)](#) conducted a study amongst high-achieving women and found that 42% were childless by the age of 40. While for some women this outcome was a conscious decision, [Hewlett \(2018\)](#) reports that 30% longed for a child. [McDonald \(2000\)](#) links low fertility rates in many developed countries with a disjuncture in the levels of gender equity in economic and social organisations. He predicts that many countries will, in the future, develop policies and processes to ensure that fertility rates do not fall below replacement levels. This finding indicates that the family outcomes which female academics may experience not only affect the individual women and their families, but also society. Australia's population is ageing at a rapid rate ([Radford et al., 2018](#)), and researchers propose that this will increase the dependency ratio and increase government spending and the subsequent fiscal gap ([APC, 2005](#); [McDonald 2000](#)).

Over the past decade, there has been some progress in increasing the number of women at senior roles in Australian academia, which has, at times, been celebrated as an indication of improved levels of gender equality. However, questions remain whether this shift speaks to structural changes, or whether it is those women who adapt to the masculine ideal academic norms who progress, thereby reinforcing, rather than resisting, hegemonic structures. Specifically, this situation may be interpreted as a successful outcome of gender equality programs, when it may instead be that biological females who acts as social males ([Acker, 1990](#)) progress their careers. In light of the presented literature, this study sought to explore: *what are the work-family experiences of women academics in Australia?*

Method

The exploratory qualitative case study investigates the work and family negotiations of male and female academics at one Australian university. While the university cannot be identified

due to ethical considerations, it is a younger and relatively smaller university in one major Australian city, rather than one of the more established legacy ones. The university was particularly suitable as it has a more equitable gender distribution at senior levels compared to other Australian universities (Australian Department of Education, 2024).

This study takes as its epistemological stand, feminist standpoint theory (FST; [Harding, 1991](#)). Feminist research seeks to understand and explain the social world from the vantage point of women's experiences and to have practical implications for improving women's lives ([Harding and Norberg, 2005](#)). As an epistemology, FST purports that social scientific research should study up by starting from the experiences of marginalised groups to gain a more objective and comprehensive understanding of reality ([Harding, 2004](#)). Such perspectives will expose aspects of social relations between genders and the institutions that support them which have previously remained concealed. By doing so, this study contributes to an understanding of objectivity which allows for various narratives, broader relevance, a more balanced view of the world, social progress and knowledge ([Lund, 2023](#)). In addition, it challenges the male-centred production of knowledge that marginalises women and other disadvantaged groups ([Kokushkin, 2014](#)). As such, FST offers a promising approach to feminist organisational and management scholars as they engage with key challenges today ([Lund, 2023](#)). This study drew on a sample of both men and women working either full-time or part-time at the case study university. Incorporating both men and women enabled an examination of how women's perspectives and experiences contrasted with those of men, thereby substantiating Harding's concept of strong objectivity (1995). The underrepresentation of senior female academics across Australia suggests that their career experiences and outcomes differ, and this study seeks to highlight some of the factors informing these disparities outside of, but likely informed by, organisational structures. According to [Harding \(2009, p. 195\)](#) FST projects are evaluated against one standard, which is whether they "in fact produce more accurate, comprehensive, rationally justifiable, and politically useful knowledge for the exploited group for which they are accountable?". In this study, including male academics highlights how, from certain social viewpoints, the true nature of human relationships, with each other and the environment, can remain hidden, despite good intentions ([Hartsock, 1998](#)).

To ensure ethical compliance, approval was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee before data collection commenced. Potential respondents were identified through their profiles on the university website and were invited to participate by email. Each Faculty at the university has a list of its academic staff and their contact details on its central website. Groupings were created by gender and academic level, and from these, 65 male and 65 female academics, equally distributed across academic levels and faculties, were selected through simple random sampling and subsequently invited to participate by email. In total, 130 emails were sent out, and 47 individuals agreed to take part. Data collection was undertaken over two months through semi-structured interviews with 29 female academics and 18 male academics. These academics were employed across the university's schools and departments. An overview of the number of sample respondents by gender and academic level is presented in [Table 1](#). Throughout this paper, respondents will be referred to by a pseudonym and their academic level.

During the interviews, respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences in academia, with a particular focus on the way in which they experienced their academic employment, and how their work impacted their personal lives. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 min each and were digitally recorded with the permission of the respondent. Data collection was halted once saturation had been reached, and no new themes emerged from the interviews.

Table 1. Study sample by gender and academic level: number of respondents at each level by gender

Academic level	Men	Women	Total
A (associate lecturer)	2	4	6
B (lecturer)	5	9	14
C (senior lecturer)	3	8	11
D (Associate professor)	4	4	8
E (professor)	3	5	8
Total	17	30	47

Source(s): Author's own work

To address the research question, a reflexive interpretivist approach was adopted. As highlighted by [Smith \(1987\)](#) social research is not conducted in a vacuum, rather, it is a purposeful activity embedded within specific political and social contexts. The reflexive approach recognises that the findings will be shaped by the values and outlooks of the researcher, the influence of which should be acknowledged and explored ([Mallalieu et al., 2002](#)). Instead of apologising for subjectivity, reflexivity is rooted in the valuing of and respect for subjectivity ([Olmos-Vega et al., 2023](#)) and considered an analytic resource ([Braun and Clarke, 2021](#)). The practice of reflexivity requires the researcher(s) to examine their own experiences, emotions, introspection and intelligent self-awareness ([Sherry, 2013](#)), and extends across the entire length of a research project ([Olmos-Vega et al., 2023](#)). Through the reflexivity process researcher(s) deconstruct the impact they have had on the research process ([Hill and Dao, 2021](#)).

For example, it is important to acknowledge that, as a middle-aged woman pursuing my PhD and returning to the work force after 15 years exclusively dedicated to primary caregiving for my three children, I share the gendered positionality or standpoints of the women respondents in the study. As such, in line with the reflexive interpretivist approach, I continuously reflect on my own positionality, biases and influence, in interpreting participants' subjective meanings ([Finlay, 2002](#)). For example, my growing experiences and observations of other women's work-family challenges have shaped my research interests, methods and analysis. As a researcher, I was enormously disheartened by the lack of attention this issue has received in contemporary literature in contrast to the organisational, public and economic outcomes associated with women's careers. As if the private struggles of women outside of the scope of their workplace are irrelevant to public discourse. In contrast, [Harding \(2009\)](#) proposed that the household serves as an appropriate starting point for research because it makes visible the everyday household work which provides the conditions for productive work, compelling me to ensure that these narratives are collected and shared.

The researcher transcribed and manually thematically analysed the interviews, which, according to [Creswell \(2013\)](#), is appropriate for text less than 500 pages in length. Thematic analysis was conducted following [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase framework, which includes familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the final report. Due to the lack of contemporary literature on the family gap, an inductive approach was used to allow data to emerge from the data without being constrained by a pre-existing framework. A broad coding frame was subsequently developed to develop meaning and initiate insights. The researcher conferred with colleagues working in the same research area in a shared, iterative approach to data analysis. Such iteration serves as a reflexive process and a method of engaging with data to cultivate our understanding of a phenomenon ([Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009](#)).

Findings

During the interviews, respondents commonly reported experiencing pressure to conform to the high expectations embedded in the ideal academic model. Long hours, large workloads and high expectations were challenges identified in all interviews. Thematic analysis indicates that there were broadly three key themes or groupings across the sample. Firstly, one theme related to the experiences of academics who were not responsible for primary family responsibilities and were able to fully commit to their academic careers. The second theme pertained to academics with primary family commitments without strong support structures who engaged in trade-offs between their work and family responsibilities. And lastly, a group of academics was identified who had family commitments and support structures at home, which allowed them to manage academic and domestic responsibilities. In this paper, these different groups are referred to as the autonomous academics, the trade-off academics and the boundary negotiators. While academics described their current situations, they also noted that their career approach changed over the life of their career due to increasing or decreasing family responsibilities, which means the groupings identified are fluid. Overall, women academics reported experiencing significantly different family outcomes than those described by their male colleagues, and all women were found to be either trade-off academics or boundary negotiators depending on their domestic context. All of the males described their careers as largely autonomous. This finding was reflected in the demographic data, which highlighted significant marital and reproductive differences between the male and female academics in the sample as shown in [Table 2](#).

As indicated by the data, 65% of the female academics in the sample (19 out of 29 interviewees) were either married or living with a partner, in contrast to 94% of their male counterparts. Regarding parental status, 19 out of the 29 female academics (65%) identified as parents, compared to 14 out of the 17 male respondents (82%) who reported having children. [Marsh \(2018\)](#) observed that employed women are more likely than their male partners to make career sacrifices for their family, and this study likewise suggests that women in Australian academia may make more family-related compromises than men. The data highlights the work–family trade-offs that most female academics in the current study expressed facing. The men with families in the sample, however, did not experience this trade-off in a way that significantly impacted their careers or domestic life, as each had a partner who was the primary carer for their child(ren). The way in which some of the female academics in the sample referred to children indicated that combining work and family was considered challenging and most women therefore opted to juggle these two facets of their lives and adjust their career aspirations or their family expectations to avoid role stress. Each of the three types of academics will be discussed further below.

Table 2. Marital and parental status of respondents by classification and gender

Classification	Women		Men	
	Married/cohabiting	Parent	Married/cohabiting	Parent
Level A	4/5	5/5	0/1	0/1
Level B	6/8	5/8	7/7	7/7
Level C	3/7	3/7	3/3	2/3
Level D	2/4	2/4	5/5	5/5
Level E	4/5	4/5	2/2	1/2
Total	19/29 (≈65%)	19/29 (≈65%)	17/18 (≈94%)	15/18 (≈83%)

Source(s): Author's own work

Autonomous academics

The first theme identified related to academics who were autonomous and reported not experiencing work–family tension. As such, they were able to navigate their career journey in line with the ideal academic norm. All the male academics in the sample generally described themselves as autonomous academics, as their partners were the primary caregivers for their children. For example, Andy [M, B] said that his wife was a “housewife” and:

[...] taking care of my kids. So, I can dedicate all my time to my students and work, even I can come and work on weekends and work on my proposals [...] She is responsible for teaching them. If there is anything she cannot handle I will get involved.

Eli (E, M), whose wife was also an academic, spoke of the time when his children were small, and said:

I like to think I did my share, maybe I did some baths and some nappies and picked them up, but I am not kidding myself there was no real equality of sharing, so looking back I could see huge amounts of disadvantage that she had that I didn't have. So if there was an experiment running I could stay at work and just assume that she would look after the kids, just an assumption and it was never challenged, but looking back I can see that that was it was unfair, so she got her Professorship a lot longer after I did but you know three maternity periods, all of the other stuff, you can see why.

Luke was an associate professor whose wife was, at the time of the interview, residing in a different country with their children, which had “given him the opportunity to spend time on my work”. Once his wife joins him in Australia, he indicated that he would have to be more balanced, or “it won't work”. Similarly, Manuel (B), who had a four-month-old baby whom his wife was looking after said, “if I currently need to work late, I can do that”.

None of the female academics with a family described navigating their careers as autonomous academics and many described the process of consciously and carefully navigating their work and domestic spheres, which in and of itself was a laborious undertaking.

Trade-off academics

The data revealed that the female academics in the sample spent more time considering, negotiating and experiencing work–family trade-offs than male academics did. Some of these trade-offs were conscious decisions, while others were trade-offs made unintentionally and over time in the pursuit of their careers. Most of the female academics in the sample expressed experiencing an unsatisfactory work–life balance, particularly when studying for a PhD (Lana, B), while multiple women indicated that their families were often unhappy with the amount of academic work conducted at home. Tanya, who was employed at Level B, revealed that:

The maternity thing is the thing that I have been mulling over because I think that would influence me in how close or how far apart I would have my children, which I shouldn't, because I would prefer to have them closer together but I would consider delaying them depending on our financial situation which could have implications whether you could or could not have children depending on how old you are and also like your family planning.

Essentially, Tanya, who was 32 at the time of the interview, was postponing having a child to build her career and be eligible for maternity leave. This decision caused her anxiety as emotionally she wished for one now, and worried that she may have trouble conceiving. Tayla (F, C) had also delayed starting a family until she turned 38 as otherwise it may have

been too late, but she acknowledged that she “was at the older end of the spectrum for having a child”. She did, as such, not have a second child. Tisha (F, C) and Eva (F, C) recognised the risk of involuntary childlessness associated with delaying motherhood and indicated that they had prioritised their work over a family. Essentially, these women had, to avoid work role conflict and pursue a career, opted to remove this potential additional demand on their time. Tisha stated:

We don't have kids. That's something that we have decided that isn't for us, and part of that is probably academia as well [...] we work a lot, that's probably not conducive to having kids, even though it probably would be nice [whispered]. And I think too he is a lot older than I am, so we are kind of getting to the age where it is starting to get too old, and I think that's something that a lot of women experience in academia that if they want their career they have to put their career first, or a lot of people feel that they have to, so some people may have kids later, which may not be possible.

Tisha specifically referred to the perceived difficulty of combining an academic career with having children, as well as the general lack of time and role stress. As indicated, she felt that she had, due to limited times and resources, to make a choice between work and the potentiality of a family. Likewise, Dylan (M, E), who was married to a female academic with career aspirations shared that their careers had led to them not having a family. Particularly telling was a statement by Stacey (F, C), who reported that:

If you're doing this correctly, there is a cost and it is a very personal cost for me, so if I don't love it then I am trading something of high value for something of low value.

She expressed a level of anxiety concerning the decision of when to have a child and was worried that she may leave it too late and have difficulties conceiving. Xavier (B) was a male academic married to a female academic, and he indicated that they had decided to wait to have a child until his partner was eligible for maternity leave. This situation further reveals the challenges associated with combining an academic career with a family for female academics.

Moreover, five of the female academics considered their employment in academia a contributor to their divorce. This was a significant finding when viewed in relation to the sample size. Not one of the male academics reported being divorced or experiencing conflict because of their academic role. A shared experience among these women academics was that their male partners often found it difficult when they spent extensive time working, which often led to feelings of resentment. For women, they would be caught between the expectations associated with the ideal academic at work, and the expectations of their families or partner in the domestic domain in line with their traditional gender role. A common theme among interviewees was that for a female academic to succeed in an academic career, having the support of her male partner was crucial. If there was a lack of domestic support, the female academics were likely to make work–family trade-offs. Dahlia (F, C) described the struggle with her then-partner:

My working hours and my total devotion to the PhD, and it's probably a horrid thing to say, but the intellectual pursuit was just way and above my ex-husband's capacity, too. Just completely bamboozled him, and he got very frustrated that I was more interested in that than him.

Similarly, Aanika (F, C) mentioned:

It definitely impacted on my marriage relationship. I was not doing the PhD then. I had divorced him but up until then I had done four degrees prior to that, and he could not understand why I was doing those things. The first one I did for fun, and he kept saying, “Why would you do a degree for fun?” But I kind of thought, “well, I want to use my brain, you know”.

The views expressed by Dahlia (F, C) and Aanika (F, C) were not isolated incidents, with three other women sharing similar experiences. In addition, Cathy (F, B) and Kim (D, D), both married, shared that their partners expressed frustration when they worked evenings or weekends, highlighting the gendered expectations men may place on their partners. These cases suggest that female academics often struggle, not only with workplace demands, but also with expectations at home, adding extra stress and difficulties. The struggle between work and family responsibilities was described by Kirsten (F, A):

I feel like I am constantly fighting with work. Fighting for space to breathe, really. To be able to do my job well.

After her divorce, Samantha (C) shared that she was, as a result, not interested in another marriage or long-term relationship, instead wishing for autonomy in her life:

I obviously have friends [...] male friends that I go out and date and do things [...] I don't mind a sleep over, but I don't want you to move in. I actually like being in charge of my stuff.

Integrated academics

Another theme that emerged from the data related to the unique advantages an academic career is perceived to offer in combining work and domestic responsibilities. In this situation an academic career was perceived to enrich aspects of the respondents' domestic lives or made the combination feasible. Four of the males and nine of the female academics in the sample specifically reported that the flexibility of academia was a positive influence on their domestic life, as it allowed them to organise their work around family commitments. As stated by Sophie (A):

I guess what I said before in terms of being able to work from home and my daughter seeing me as a role model. Like, when I say I work on weekends I also have the ability to work from home and pick up my daughter from school at 3 pm on afternoons, so when I do work those extra hours on weekends and things, I don't perceive them to be extra, because they're not. Because they are actually part of my workload but because I am getting the job done when it is convenient for me, really, that is gold, isn't it?.

Unlike the trade-off academics presented earlier, many of these women also had strong support structures and supportive spouses to share caring responsibilities, which facilitated the combination of family and a career in academia. Tayla (C), for example, had a partner who worked shifts and could do "school pick-ups and drop-offs". Angie (E) similarly described her husband as "instrumental" in her career, as he was a "stay-at-home dad, looking after the two girls and I had a full-time job". She described herself as not having been a "mummy mum", and being quite strict about not staying home, even when her kids were sick or wanted her to.

This flexibility, however, while described as advantageous in facilitating domestic responsibilities, also lead to challenges. For example, women academics and one male academic with children described often undertaking work during family time (Hamid, B), while for most women family responsibilities were similarly conducted during work hours, thereby blurring the lines between these two facets of their lives. Because of the lack of standardised hours in academia many women tailored their work commitments around their family responsibilities. Consequently, they completed work in the evenings and on the weekends, with no clear boundary recognised between work and family commitments, and, as they reported, very little time for themselves and rest and recovery. This finding emphasises that the unique academic work context allows women to be employed as academics, but that this does mean they often work at other times, such as evenings and

weekends. Essentially, the female academics described always having multiple roles and multiple responsibilities without a clear barrier delineating one sphere from the other. Male academics, however, expressed a clear separation between work and family, as demonstrated in the Autonomous Academic section. To illustrate, Samantha reported:

I think women have like the new career aspirations competing with guys, then they have the problem that they become mothers [...] and it's not a problem, it's a brilliant thing, but then they have that juggle and when you've got two people in a household who have both got careers, which happened to us, which one has got to take precedence?

In Samantha's case, because her husband was earning more money, she became the second wage earner who had to make the career sacrifices to look after their children. She was grateful that she was able to continue working despite her family commitments, but also acknowledged that, as a result, she felt like she was always working.

Discussion

This study responds to [Mason et al.'s \(2013\)](#) call to extend the focus of gender equity studies to also include the family outcomes, or what we refer to as the potential *family gap*, for women who work. Specifically, this exploratory research sought to extend existing research on gender equity beyond the current focus on the number of women in senior academic classifications in Australia. It is, as yet, unclear what the associated family outcomes, both immediate and long-term, of an academic career are for women in academia, and society as a whole. This study sought to better understand the work–family trade-offs and negotiations that may occur for women who seek to pursue an academic career, while also having or considering having, a family. Among the respondents, significant marital and reproductive differences were identified by gender. Specifically, significantly fewer female academics were in a relationship or had children, and many more were divorced. These findings mirror [Ezzedeen and Ritchey \(2009\)](#), who found that, amongst executive women, women pay a higher private cost than their male counterparts. It appears that this increased private cost also exists amongst Australian female academics.

In the current sample, three ways in which the work and domestic spheres were navigated were identified, essentially along gender lines: those who navigated their careers as autonomous academics, the trade-off academics who engaged in concessions between work and family and the integrated academics who found that academia offered them the flexibility to engage in both work and family life. All the male academics reported experiencing autonomy in their careers, and all had partners undertaking primary care responsibilities. The female academics, however, primarily described their careers as involving trade-offs or facilitating the integration of both work and family.

Most of the women respondents had engaged in significant work–family trade-offs over their working lives. Some of these trade-offs were conscious, i.e. the decision or timing of having a child, while others were unconscious and related to the disintegration of spousal relationships which several women attributed to their pursuit of an academic career. The women in the sample were more likely to be divorced, and for many, their focus on work and career, in several cases, caused conflict or friction with their partners. Indeed, spousal support was found to be an important determinant of career outcomes for female academics. Those women who had supportive partners were better able to integrate work and domestic responsibilities. Several women, however, reported that their partners did not support, and in some cases, even resented their career focus, which drove them to engage in professional or family trade-offs. In the current study, female academics were less likely than their male counterparts to have children, with some choosing to delay or forego parenthood altogether.

Research suggests that delaying having children is a risky strategy because the decreasing fecundity with increasing age may lead to involuntary childlessness (Lampic *et al.*, 2006). In addition, the identified family outcomes have wider implications for society. For example, it has been suggested that for fertility rates not to fall below replacement levels, countries are likely to increasingly develop specific policies (McDonald 2000). Australia, because of its declining fertility and increasing life expectancy, has an ageing population (Radford *et al.*, 2018). If the fertility rate drops below the replacement level, this creates an inverted pyramid age distribution, increasing the dependency ratio and costs associated with aged care. This situation would result in higher taxes and payment cuts, or both, to support the large number of Australians who are no longer part of the workforce.

McDonald (2000) related the low fertility in many developed countries to the inequity in economic and social organisations. If women who have children are not supported in creating a satisfactory work-life balance in their society or organisation, then they may choose to opt out and leave the workforce all together (Zemon and Bahr, 2005). These women, however, take an array of knowledge and expertise with them, which is then lost to the organisation. Conversely, women who are keen to develop their career in this environment may choose to delay having children, potentially leading to involuntary childlessness or having fewer children than desired. In either scenario, women must make a compromise between elements of their work or family. It has been proposed that only more exerted efforts towards achieving gender equity can facilitate women's dual roles and reverse the disconcerting trends of declining fertility or women opting out. It is important that such an approach extends the focus of gender equity efforts beyond the number of women in senior leadership positions, to also include women's personal lives. Rather than women having to choose between pursuing a family or a career, wider changes are required to ensure that women do not find themselves in the crevice between enacting the incompatible societal gender and the ideal academic roles. The findings of this study suggest that current gender equity efforts are not sufficient to facilitate a woman's career and personal lives but rather require many women to make concessions.

In addition to the cost to Australia as a society, as well as to the loss of talent and knowledge for organisations, these family outcomes affect the lives of individual female academics, in both the short and long term. Hewlett (2018) found that a large percentage of high-achieving women who were childless involuntarily, expressed a yearning for a child at a point at which it was too late for them to naturally conceive. This situation suggests that the female academics in this study who prioritised career advancement and decided to either delay or forgo having children may later regret their decision. Therefore, excluding this crucial negotiation when implementing gender equity initiatives and programs within organisations only addresses part of the narrative.

It has also been recognised that academia can offer academics valuable flexibility in terms of location and work times not found in most other professions (Fothergill and Feltey, 2003; Klocker and Drozdowski, 2012). Some women, for example, expressed gratitude in being able to continue working, rather than having to quit, to undertake family responsibilities. Flexibility, however, was found to be a double-edged sword for the female academics, in line with Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra (2013), as the inherent flexibility of academia created the perception that they were always working with little or no time for rest or respite. The interrelationship between work and personal life has received increased attention (Golden and Geisler, 2007), and research has clearly indicated that respite from work is essential for an individual to maintain wellbeing and productivity (Flaxman *et al.*, 2012). However, Kinman (2016) has argued that managing the work-life boundary is particularly challenging

for female academics, which aligns with the findings of the current study highlighting the distinct disparity in both the family and career experiences of male and female academics.

Future studies and limitations

This study was exploratory in nature and based on a relatively small sample of academics at one public higher education institution in Australia. As such, it might be argued that the participants do not present a true cross section of the academic workforce. In addition, this study did not focus on any intersecting vulnerabilities which the respondents may be experiencing. This focus would be a suitable area for further research, particularly as gender roles can be intensified across cultural contexts (Best and Williams, 2001). However, despite the limitations presented, the findings of this study provide compelling narratives to consider when researching and implementing gender equity initiatives and policies. The findings indicate the way in which male academics, as autonomous academics, were able to focus their time and energy on building their careers. Many female academics, on the other hand, expressed having to engage in trade-offs by choosing to focus on their work or their family. Others appreciated the flexibility of academia, which they felt allowed them to both meet their primary caring demands as well as build their careers. These female academics often had partners who supported their aspirations. The flexibility offered in academia was found to be a double-edged sword, however, with the boundaries between work and family blurring significantly, and several women reporting that they feel they work all the time and do not get time to “breathe”. These findings raise questions about whether current gender equity efforts genuinely challenge existing structures or inadvertently reinforce them. Women who advance often embrace a masculine approach to career progression rather than actively resisting the dominant expectations that demand unwavering commitment to one’s career. The findings suggest that many women pursuing academic careers encounter a *family gap*. Investigating the experiences of female academics over a prolonged period and on a broader scale, and across career stages and age categories, would be a valuable avenue for future research, offering important insights into the long-term impact of their family gap and career choices on their lives.

Conclusion

To complement the plethora of available gender equity research focusing on the career gap experienced by women in Australian academia, this study sought to explore the work–family experiences of these women. Specifically, it focused on some of the personal trade-offs, of the *family gap*, women in academia may make to build their careers in the gendered academic context. The findings indicate that women are more likely to make family sacrifices for their career, and a significant percentage appear to delay or choose not to have children. Several of the respondents also experienced the disintegration of their relationships with partners who did not appreciate their academic aspirations, highlighting the crucial role of spousal support for female academics. The concessions exposed in the current study should be considered the hidden cost of the current gender equity agenda. It is important to bring these to the fore to drive structural societal and organisational change, and to create an environment where, like their male colleagues, women do not have to continuously engage in trade-off negotiations between work and family.

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Further reading

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