Geographies of emotion in university spaces: Sole parent postgraduate subjects negotiating ‘child-free’ educational boundaries

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I explore the emotional geographies of Australian universities which tend to (re)produce higher education spaces as ‘child-free’. Drawing on Butler’s theoretical tool of performativity and Ahmed’s conceptual use of emotion, I seek to examine how educable sole parent students are constituted in university spaces largely prescribed as child-free. By examining some experiences of sole parent postgraduates, I aim to demonstrate some of the ways emotions work to reinscribe and regulate academic recognisability through boundary maintenance of university spatial arrangements. The sole parent postgraduate experiences I draw from in this paper illustrate that educational spaces are not passive; they are productive and regulatory. Speech acts that (re)produce university spaces as ‘child-free’ have particular implications for sole parent postgraduates who often experience unrelenting responsibilities of child-care. Sole parent postgraduates in this study shared their experiences of emotional bonds with their children as often in conflict with their sense of belonging and engagement with university spaces and practices. Butler’s theory of performativity is useful to examine some of the ways the conflict between sole parent childcare and postgraduate education is experienced and the potential for productive manoeuvres by sole parents to disrupt and re-work the emotional geographies within Australian higher education spaces.

1. Introduction

The language of exclusion is, by and large, spatial; who’s in, who’s out, at the heart, on the margins (Gulson and Symes, 2007, p. 99)

This paper begins to explore what sole parent bodies might feel and do in the educational spaces created within Australian universities. Drawing from my research considering the experiences of sole parents in postgraduate education, I consider how relations of power are mobilised and disrupted for postgraduate students within the possibilities and constraints of university spaces. In this paper I consider how sole parents were able to engage with and belong to university educational spaces, whilst maintaining ‘ideal’ student-hood and parent-hood in an institutional context wherein, ‘emotion remains quarantined in a mind/body split’ (Kenway and Youdell, 2011, p. 132). My aim in this article is to employ Butler’s theory of performativity and Ahmed (2004) understanding of emotion to generate new understandings of how emotion is productive within educational spaces (Armstrong, 2003; Massey, 1994). The sole parent’s in this research were all women reflecting that 85 percent of sole parent families in Australia are led by women. Participants in this research spoke of the emotional connections with their children often being in conflict with their feelings of belonging and successful engagement with university education. The complex, competing and highly textured nature of emotions for participants in this study are shaped by their subjectivity as sole parents, often understood as marginal and in deficit, and also through their emerging sense of belonging and purposeful engagement with postgraduate education. By occupying these contested emotional spaces as sole parents within the academy, participants demonstrated that through engaging with ‘different spaces simultaneously, there is potential for emotional, social, economic and political transformation’ (Longhurst et al., 2012, p. 309). I argue in this paper that transformative potential attained through university qualifications should be fairly accessible to all Australians. Equity aims of widening participation in higher education are advanced by nuanced understandings of emotional and spatial connections which may form exclusionary boundaries which can restrict retention and engagement.
The experiences of sole parent participants within university spaces illustrate that educational spaces are not passive; space is embodied and emotive. The ways in which university spaces are deployed and spatial boundaries maintained is crucial to participant’s sense of engagement and belonging to and in that postgraduate educational space. Space and emotion is central to the ways in which sole parent participants read and interpreted their recognisability as postgraduate students. I suggest that this emotional sense of belonging and attachment is critical to engagement and retention for sole parent postgraduates as non-traditional and often marginal students. ‘Understanding this conflict is essential to creating policies and programs supportive of single-parent students’ (Yakoboski, 2010, p. 467). The participants in this study are performatively produced in relation to the people, practices and policies that constitute higher educational spaces within the Australian context that seeks to increase engagement and participation of non-traditional and diverse students.

Following Ahmed (2004) social conception of emotion, my analysis notes that ‘emotions flow between people, they animate social, cultural, political and economic collectivities and travel across time, place and space’ (Kenway and Youdell, 2011, p. 133). Conceiving of emotion as ‘flowing’ illustrates the interconnected and interpretative processes these sole parents postgraduates made in order to manoeuvre a sense of belonging and recognisability within the academy. The emotional flow was mediated through space and people and used by participants to read and negotiate their sense of how they were being constituted as postgraduates by the institution. In this paper I argue that sole parent postgraduate participants read the emotional flow of university spaces as largely ‘child-free’. They inferred from the demarcation of childlessness in university spaces as a separation of familial from educational, a sorting and regulatory process that constructed and maintained normative higher educational spaces as ‘child-free’. Christopher and Kolers (2012) argue similarly that the everyday functioning of their department takes on a ‘childless’ character.

A significant body of academic work examines how women experience the ‘childless’ spaces of universities. This paper draws on existing scholarly work to provide a foundation for exploring sole parent experiences within the Australian academy. This work is important because the significant majority of sole parents are women. Morley (2013) describes a gender bias in the academy wherein academics are understood as ‘as zero-load workers, devoid of care responsibilities … Women academics [are] caught between two greedy institutions — the extended family and the university’ (Morley, 2013, p. 122). In their analysis of academic work and family balance Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004) noted that the ‘professoriate presumes a singleness of purpose that parenthood does not always allow’ (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2004, p. 237). The conditions for parents in the academy has been studied extensively by Mary Ann Mason (2009); (Also see Wolflinger et al., 2009), who notes that in the academy there is never a good time to have children. An edited collection by Lynn O’Brien Hallstein and Andrea O’Reilly (2012), Academic motherhood in a post-second wave context: Challenges, strategies and possibilities notes the conflict between the ‘intensive and unbounded career-path and ideal worker norms of academia that centre on achieving tenure and promotion, and the demanding and also unbounded requirements of the contemporary ideology of “good mothering”, intensive mothering’ (p. 3).

My research is concerned with the ways that, ‘[e]ducational systems create spaces which are reproductive of existing social relationships and dominant values in society’ (Armstrong, 2003, p. 28). I suggest that a significant dominant and embedded social relationship exists between child-care work and women and that this is reflected in the institutional practices of universities. In this research the university institution creates the conditions that make possible the postgraduate subject and the power relations that act on the subject. University conditions ‘place rigid structures on how people live out their lives’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p. 72). The sole parents I spoke with shared a sense that as the only adult caring for a child, they were often faced with times where university work and child-care work coincided and conflicted. This clear demarcation between the familial and higher education for sole parent postgraduates is significant because it minimises or refuses an acknowledgement of intensified sole parental obligations and constrains who and how postgraduate students are able to be recognised in university spaces.

Tasmin Hinton-Smith’s (2012) book Lone Parents’ experiences as higher education students: Learning to juggle provides an important reference point for this study. Hinton-Smith is a sociology research fellow and her book documents a longitudinal study of 77 lone mothers studying in UK higher education. Hinton-Smith (2012) establishes a clear differentiation between sole parent students and other mature age parent students because sole parents hold the responsibilities for ‘meeting both the material and emotional needs of children … [and] as sole breadwinners’ (Hinton-Smith, 2012, p. 44). For the sole parents in this study the emotive responses to their child-care and provider responsibilities are central to orientations towards postgraduate education and the academy more broadly. Emotional ties to children become critical within educational spaces that tend to be constructed as ‘child-free’. In this paper I take up these concerns regarding parental academic conflict and consider how many university spaces are demarcated as ‘child-free’ and how sole parent postgraduates negotiate emotional attachments to both their children and their postgraduate education within university space constituted as childless.

1.1. The research project

This paper draws from a wider research project, a collective case study which is attentive to how gender is performed through particular constructions of sole parenting at an intersecting point with postgraduate education. This research explores the distinctive experiences of sole parent postgraduates a cohort of significant interest because as at June 2012, there were 600,892 one parent families with dependent children in Australia, and most (85%) were female lead families, making up 22% of families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011 Census). This represents a significant cohort within the Australian community, and a group I suggest, whose educational aspirations, experiences and outcomes remains under-researched. This research is contextualised by the 2008 Bradley Review into Higher Education in Australia, which stated an aim for 20% of university students to come from low socio-economic backgrounds. This 20% target remains un-nmet reflecting broader concerns in relation to the widening participation agenda that has sought to redress the ongoing under-representation of diverse social groups in universities.

This research is framed by feminist principles that seek to ‘form connections between personal accounts and theoretical discourse’ (Kannen, 2013, p. 180). I sought participants for this study by advertising with the postgraduate associations in each Group of Eight (G08) university in Australia. I purposefully focused on G08 universities because they conduct the majority of research in the Australian higher education context, contributing more than two thirds of Australia's research activity and output (https://go8.edu.au/page/go8-indicators). In order to consider regional and rural postgraduate experiences I also placed requests for participants in selected regionally based universities. Despite placing notices to request participants in all G08 universities and 5 second tier Australian universities, no male sole parents agreed to participate in this research. I was able to conduct face-to-face interviews with...
10 participants in two Australian cities and one regionally based university.

For the purposes of this research post-graduate study includes masters and doctoral level qualifications via on-campus studies at Australian universities during the 2012 academic year. Eight participants were doctoral students and two Masters student’s participated in this research. In this study, sole parents are understood as parents living with a child or children under the age of 18 of whom they have economic and care responsibilities.

The gendered constructions of sole parents are critical to the positioning I take up in this paper. The normative attachments for participants were doctoral students and two masters student’s Australian universities during the 2012 academic year. Eight participants in two Australian cities and one regionally based.

Parents being female and also highly evident in the constructions of mothering and fathering as largely distinctive up the possibilities of parental care-work that may disrupt the educational experiences of the sole parents participants in this study. Butler’s framework of gendered performativities is useful to examine the descriptions of women as mothers which in turn (re) produces women as mothers. I explore how sole parenting opens up the possibilities of parental care-work that may disrupt the existing binaries of mothering and fathering as largely distinctive gendered performatives.

I began to understand this care-work not as tasks usually assigned to mothers or others to fathers, but activities and acts that are required in the everyday project of raising children. In this way, parenting became acts of care, love, ethics and intent; acts that are not particular to, nor dependent upon, gendered constructs of mothering and fathering’ (Hook, 2015, p. 790)

I suggest that this parental care-work has important implications for sole parent postgraduates because they are often traversing across motherhood/fatherhood binaries; an additional and intensified parenting load that is critical to how they can take up and engage with postgraduate education. Re-working parental binaries was critical to the participants in this research because they ‘read’ university spaces and their sense of belonging through an understanding of themselves as parents first and foremost (Hook, 2015). In this way, sole parenting as an often constant and always intensified responsibility to one’s children was ever-present in the movement through and within university spaces for participants in this research and it was through this lens that they began to understand themselves as postgraduates.

I purposefully focus on postgraduate education because it is the minimum and necessary qualification to begin a career as an academic and/or researcher. This projection towards an academic/researcher career was evident in all my interviews with sole parent postgraduates. A future career in the academy was an important motivator for the participants in this research and whilst this linear career progression is uncertain and problematic it was nevertheless critical to how these sole parents invested in their postgraduate education. My focus on postgraduate education is also critical to extending explorations of equitable access and engagement within higher education beyond a focus on undergraduate education.

1.1. University spaces constituted as child-free zones

Educational spaces are produced, they have boundaries and rules that attempt to normalise and regulate people. University geographies take up and elicit emotions, they are interactive, creating a particular ‘physical and emotional choreography’ (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 21). Referring to choreography illustrates that space and people are interrelated and entwined. Puwar (2004) notes that, ‘[b]odies do not simply move through spaces but constitute and are constituted by them’ (p. 32). The sole parent participants in this study noted that the spatial choreography of their university campus was diffusely mapped but that within almost all university spaces having children present was ‘unusual’ and that this was intensified in more academic settings, particularly libraries and within faculty buildings.

Placing restrictions and demarcations on children in university spaces similarly acts on the care-givers of children.

Gendered segregations via the geography and architecture of built-places contribute to the subordination and spatialized social control of women, either by denying access to knowledge and activities crucial for the reproduction of power and privilege or by limiting mobility more generally within places defined as unsafe, physically threatening, or inappropriate (Gieryn, 2000, p. 474)

The participants in this study spoke of their sense of un-welcome unease in relation to their children being with them in university spaces. I suggest this un-easiness is an example of what Gieryn (2000) describes as spatialized control of women which also has the capacity, in the context of higher education, to restrict their access to knowledge and the privileges associated with higher education.

The physical and emotional choreography of universities was illustrated in this research through the difficulties participants spoken in relation to attending postgraduate classes and seminars when they were scheduled outside formal child-care hours of operation. When compulsory postgraduate classes are scheduled outside childcare hours, a sole parent may be particularly excluded because they do not have the option of passing the care of their child to another parent. Participants were concerned that the presence of their children would be interpreted by academic staff, particularly academic supervisors, as evidence of their distractions, their lack of commitment and suitability to be recognized as a postgraduate student. Therefore, conforming to a postgraduate identity is clearer for some subjects than others; it is more work for some students to stretch towards compliance and intelligibility.

The following sections of this paper explores some of the ways spatial arrangements of universities are often constituted as child-free zones and some of the ways in which participant sole parents navigated these spatial arrangements. I note that university spaces are not experienced as universally ‘child-free’ and are constituted in evolving and various ways. However, this paper draws on multiple university spaces including libraries, HDR seminars, teaching spaces and faculty spaces to examine how space influences postgraduate engagement for the sole parents in this study.

1.2. Place and belonging in higher education spaces

“There were even little children running around”

This statement prompted my research focus on how emotion and space operate within the social institutions of higher education. How are academic spaces constituted and for whom? This quote was made by a postgraduate student in a faculty HDR student information session. Judith Butler (1990) refers to speech acts as a ’bodily act with specific linguistic consequences’ (p. xxvii). The quote above refers to a university library space assigned only to post-graduate students that did not conform to this student’s expectations of academic space because it was not child-free. It is possible to regard this statement as regulatory and re-inscribing childlessness within university spaces. Laurel Richardson (1997) reminds us that “[p]olicing is always about bodies, though, isn’t it? It’s not just about ideas, but about people’ (p. 148). By publicly voicing disapproval at the presence of children in academic spaces, this speech act is ‘communicating information about position, direction and movement, a sense of belonging and absence, or being home or estranged’ (Gusson and Symes, 2007, p. 99). Whilst I do not
advocate for the possibility for children to be present at all times in all university spaces, it is important to be attentive to how the operations of space are (re)productive and have the potential to be exclusionary.

I suggest that the above quote draws on an existing academic culture and practice that tends to exclude children. Whilst this student is attempting to contain and govern how academic space ought be experienced, (child-free) the paradox of performativity is evident because clearly someone did occupy this space with their children and this very speech act makes visible the potential for this to occur and in doing so opens up the potential of adaption within the process of constituting the academic subject within conflicting contexts. The performative act of introducing children to this academic space unsettled the normative category of the postgraduate student. The performative process continues in what Sara Ahmed (2004a) argues becomes a, 'loop of the performative', demonstrated by the reiterative and citational practice of the second postgraduate student attempting to re-claim academic space as child-free, attempting to regulate 'what may not take place there' (Lefebvre in Puwar, 2004, p. 35). In this speech act, the male student attempts to re-inscribe postgraduate space as child-free and through this process, students who are also parents are being 'halled into the social norms of the academy' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p. 74).

This speech act has the potential to become part of a constraining trajectory because it attempts to enforce spatial control that reflects the 'culturally specific distinction between public and private' (Massey, 1994, p. 179). By constraining children to private spaces, or at least not academic/postgraduate spaces we are effectively constraining the person who cares for them. Given that it is overwhelmingly women who care for children, this speech act is (re)productive of gender categories and attempts to use these categories to regulate the conditions of engagement with an academic space. Regulating university students in this way is detailed in the work of Quinn who found that student parents engaged in the academy and that institutions acknowledged that students can have children, 'but a separation was clearly expected between them and the learning environment' (Quinn, 2003, p.113).

1.3. Parental performative acts: contesting the normative unencumbered academic

An interesting example of how university space can be constituted as 'child-free' is illustrated through research participant Ani's experiences of an academic moderation meeting. Moderation meetings are common practice within Australian universities and Ani's experiences illustrate a preference and/or tendency within academic spaces for parental care-work and intellectual work to remain separate. Ani has one child, aged 4 with whom she was pregnant in the final year of her undergraduate degree. She receives an Australian Postgraduate Award scholarship to support her full-time PhD ($A23,000 per year) and Parenting Payment (Single) (A government social security payment which supports sole parents with children under the age of 6 years up to $720.00 fortnightly) and also works as a casual university tutor and in hospitality. She receives no financial assistance in terms of child support. Her family has a strong education background and is strongly middle class, although currently she lives with significant financial pressure. Ani shared this experience which I suggest illustrates how university spaces operate as child-free zones through effects of discursive and regulatory exchanges.

Ani's recollection of an academic moderation meeting also directs us towards a consideration of who can respond to this particular framing of particular university spaces.

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Genine: Are there any other university policies that you can think of that affect you, what about if you had to bring your daughter?
Ani: I have done that so many times.
Genine: How does that go?
Ani: A lot of people tut tut and look funny and I find the pram logistic crazy.
Genine: Like moderation meetings.
Ani: Yeah, because they always have to be on a day that I don't have childcare because they have to be on a day where everyone can come. My daughter is very cheeky, and they are saying, 'this is so distracting'. But I was really good, one time it was my supervisor who was the moderator, and she said, well 'why don't you go do it in another room', which was really funny.

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Performative acts can be ‘linguistic and bodily’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p. 73). Here, Ani brings her daughter to an academic moderation meeting to ‘fit in’ with the academic schedule and in doing so takes up an academic practice of high levels of availability, flexibility and work demands. Ani is constituted as a becoming academic through her performative act of attending the moderation meeting when it suits everyone else. Ani’s recognition as an academic remains incomplete because her daughter is present, others in the moderation meeting voice dissatisfaction with this situation in an attempt to regulate and/or refuse Ani’s act of bringing her child to this academic meeting. I suggest this speech act/s is a corrective manoeuvre that attempts to designate how academic subjects work in academic spaces and who may be present and how their presence is able to be.

This exchange within the moderation meeting illustrates how the relational nature of space and emotion is evoked within the power relations between a postgraduate student, acting in a casual sessional teaching role, and academics who disagree with how this particular university space is utilised. This clash of emotion and space is performative, in that it is cites existing norms, institutional norms of ‘child-free’ university spaces. This exchange is also highly individualized in that the discussion regarding the presence of Ani’s child does not focus on accessible child-care, nor the structural demands on academic work that are sedimented within university institutions. This exchange is also performative because it repeats past conventions and cites the pre-existing gendered norm of female child-care. Repetition of mothering norms are productive; it normalises and regulates the category of ‘mother’; who is able to mother, how they are able to mother and in what conditions they are able to do so. Compulsory motherhood is a gendered performative act that is constitutive of femininity and regulates how subjects who are ‘mothers’ are able to act within institutions. Parental acts produce particular academic subjects, keeping children away from academic spaces is to conform to academic expectations.

Ani’s experience during this moderation meeting illustrates the performative and ongoing process related to how her academic subjectivity takes shape. Her supervisor who as the senior academic present, intervenes in a supportive response to effectively over-rule the vocal disapproval of Ani’s child being present. The supervisor’s positions in the academic hierarchy enables her to draw on power and discourse to counter the regulatory attempts by some of the academics in the moderation meeting by telling them to leave the academic space and thereby re-casting the academic and the space somewhat differently. Ani’s performativity can be understood as unsettling normative understandings of academic work and academic space through a negotiation of conflicting subjectivities. However, this unsettling is only possible because of the supportive speech act of her academic supervisor who has the
power to do so because of her position in the academic hierarchy. This exchange illustrates performativity as an unfinished process of repetition within power relations that (re)produces academic subjects and spaces. These exchanges are performative acts which are mediated by the conditions within which the process of repetition is able to constitute subjects.

Each participant in this study spoke of an awkwardness and a sense of being ‘out-of-place’ when they had their children with them on-campus. In the book, Space Invaders (2004), Nirmal Puwar discusses the experiences of non-universal bodies which exist ‘as anomalies in places where they are not the normative figure of Geniinity, their capabilities are viewed suspiciously’ (Puwar, 2004, p. 59). Parent students attached to children in a university context are highly visible because children tend to be a rarity on university campuses. Negotiations of, ‘visibility help[s] us to understand the nuanced dynamics of subtle forms of exclusion as well as the basis of differentiated inclusion’ (Puwar, 2004, p. 58). The sole parents in this study were acutely aware of the issue of visibility and the perceived risks of high levels of visibility as sole parents and as unconventional postgraduate students. Most of the sole parents interviewed understood that being non-universal students had implications for how their competencies were perceived. Participants regarded it as easier and safer to remain invisible as sole parents to postgraduate students. When universities are constructed as child free zones it may establish an academic culture whereby ‘being a mother in HE seems so negatively received that women teachers [and students] have sometimes tried to ‘pass’ as childfree’ (Quinn, 2003, p. 67). Mostly, when sole parents were able to choose to remain invisible as sole parents in university spaces they did so, they tended to only bring their children onto campus when the logistics of sole parenting forced them to do.

This visibility concern is illustrated in the experiences of Gillian, a research participant who incorporates university tutoring work into her parental and postgraduate research work. Gillian is completing a PhD part-time at a regional university with one child aged 6. Her applications for university scholarships have failed and she receives government social welfare support - Parenting Payment (single). She lives in a regional area and is under serious financial strain despite paid casual university tutoring work.

Academic career norms compel postgraduates to take up academic work that may fulfill future employment criteria. However, Gillian’s sole parent postgraduate performativity disrupts the norms of the academic subject because she took her child with her when she worked as a sessional academic tutor.

Genine: Have you come across other seminars, meetings where that happens?
Gillian: Yes, yes, there has been a lot of meetings or seminars here that start at 8.30 am and he doesn’t kinder until 9.15 am and I just say I’m not coming. Ummm, I am not going to drag my son in to a meeting type environment because he does … he’s not a sit and write type of child. We do have an iPad and he will play with that, but he talks and stuff and ummm, all kids talk …

Genine: Is he 5 and a half?
Gillian: Yeah, he’s 5 and a half. (laughs). So now I just make the decision that I’m not going to take him and if that’s going to be an issue then I just get notes. There was one particular incident about a month ago, I went to an after school seminar that had about 20 people in it. I took my son because I was really interested in the topic and in the pre-nibble drinks and pre-presentation nibble and drinks he was really quiet, he was talking to people and he was eating and stuff like that. I had the person who was running the seminar and ask, what, I’m trying to think of the exact words, ‘what’s your child rearing strategies’ or something like that, ‘for when he gets loud’. I was really taken aback by that, I just thought he’s not making a fuss now, why would I, this goes with that single parenting thing as well, why the hell would I bring him to somewhere and just let him go nuts. Because I know that is the perception that a lot of people have of single parents when they take their kids and they go nuts. He knows his rules, and I felt really offended by that, I didn’t say that to that person.

Genine: There is an assumption there that behaviour is going to happen.
Gillian: Exactly, it’s an assumption that’s going to happen.

Butler’s theory of performativity is instructive because it enables a reading of how gendered norms are employed and also how they are reproduced through repetition but may also be altered during the course of repetitive interactions. In this interview excerpt, Gillian shares a sense of wanting recognition as a subject who is professionally and fully engaged with the task of academic tutoring. Gillian repeats the category of academic subject in these performative acts. However, having her child present creates an instability of the category ‘academic’ that her tutoring work seeks to establish. Gillian constitutes herself as an academic within conflicting demands that she struggles to make sense of. She talks of the students taking time to ‘get used to’ having her child at the tutorial but interprets their kindness and interactions with her son as them becoming comfortable with her child’s presence. She is ambivalent about her son’s presence in this academic space saying she was ‘in the room, but not 100% focused’. The normative accounts of an academic who are/should be available to teach evening classes without interference from caring responsibilities are also the conditions that make Gillian’s tutor identity possible.

Gillian also sees recognition as a contributing and engaged member of faculty staff by attending interesting academic seminars.
Gillian undertakes additional reflective work to reconcile her conflicted position of being an interested and engaged academic attending a faculty seminar and that of a sole parent with unrelenting obligations for care of her child. The convening academic of this seminar found it difficult to recognize Gillian as a normative and productive academic subject because she had her child with her and this was interpreted as ‘living an unviable academic life’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p. 79). Whilst it may be the individual who is ‘doing’ gender, the ‘doing’ is always interactional, institutional and ongoing. Arguably the session convenor seems to place, ‘too much emphasis on the individual’s ability to free themselves from the constraints of gender’ (Rasmussen, 2009, p. 438). Gillian can only facilitate her ‘becoming’ academic subjectivity, a person that is actively engaged with her faculty, within the conditions that produce her.

Another study participant Michelle shared her experiences of combining sole parenting and postgraduate study. She articulates an understanding of clear expectations of a separation between children and university campus spaces. Michelle is a sole parent who was completing her 4th full-time year of her PhD at a G08 university when she became pregnant with her only child who was 2 years old when we spoke. She took an intermission during which she was paid maternity leave and returned to her PhD on a part-time basis and her scholarship payments were extended. She receives minimal child support, no regular co-parent care and receives Parenting Payment (Single). Her family is supportive of her education, is middle class and she currently lives with her father to manage her limited finances exacerbated by the removal of childcare funding for her pre-school son.

This is how she responded to my question about children and university space.

Genine: Do you feel as a parent in the library for example that when you're on-campus with your son that having a child here is an issue for people.

Michelle: I find it... there is a little bit of embarrassment I guess, going into the Chemistry department, not so much the rest of the university, but where I am more familiar with people, not to say that anyone has done anything or said anything it's just, I suppose, you know, if I found out that someone was pregnant and doing a PhD it would be a massive thing for them, I would consider it a massive thing for them to have to deal with, so I probably, umm, you know, people probably think that about me and think oh my goodness — what is she going, how is she going to manage this.

These thoughts indicate a difficult movement for Michelle as connected to a child within her university space and especially in the chemistry department where she is ‘more familiar with people’. Michelle was not embarrassed about having a child on the general campus but felt a ‘little bit of embarrassment’ with ‘people she knew’ and specifically in the chemistry department. She also discusses a silencing practice that is a performative act within her Chemistry department; the not asking and not referring to the presence of a child. Michelle shares that no one ‘has done anything or said anything’ about her pregnancy and child but she interprets this lack of discussion as a discourse in itself; an avoiding/silencing discourse. Michelle regards having a baby whilst doing a PhD as ‘massive’, her understanding of this experience as significant serves to draw attention to the lack of reference to or discussion of her experiences of this. By understanding this silencing and lack of communication as a linguistic action, it becomes performative because it attempts to (re)place a form and structure to appropriate and normalized postgraduate student identities. There is a doing and an undoing of gendered subjectivities here constituted through the repeated acts of moving through different university campus spaces with a child. Michelle cannot be a Chemistry PhD student without being in the Chemistry department, that department makes her PhD possible so she must also negotiate how the power relations that exist in that space act on her subjectivity as a PhD student and parent.

Michelle’s interaction with her supervisor in relation to her pregnancy mid-way through her PhD research is also a performative that is based on a linguistic action, it is a citational practice.

Michelle: I know my supervisor has said, this has never happened before and I don’t know what to do with the annual review forms and that sort of thing and there was a question, like, are there circumstances beyond the student’s control that have affected their studies (laughs). And he said, I don’t know if having a baby is beyond your control. (laughs).

Genine: Well, umm
Michelle: Gingetti!! (laughs)

This senior academic acting as Michelle’s supervisor makes it clear in this exchange that having a baby and doing a PhD is not the norm, it is un-heard of and one can infer from this discussion that he regards it as problematic. Through this interaction this supervisor, who is in a position of seniority and power, nominates particular boundaries of university space that is highly gendered because it is female students who have babies and to a large extent care for those babies. By questioning her choices to have a baby and nominating this on an annual PhD review form as a factor that is effecting her study this interaction is an example of ways that gender through a ‘mothering’ discourse is performatively constructed within a university context. The instability Michelle feels in this interaction with her supervisor occurs within social relations, power relations and due to the blurring of clear boundaries of space. This repetitive calling into being of a reviewed and reviewable postgraduate student is possible because of the space within which it take places and which it refers, the Chemistry department space. Michelle’s pregnancy and child is experienced by her academic supervisor as a ‘disruption of established academic knowledges ... themselves constitutive of spatialities of knowledge’ (Gregson and Rose, 2000, p. 447). That the supervisor holds a position of seniority in the Chemistry department space which is critical to this performativity act and it is through such exchanges that the emotional geographies of university spaces are (re)produced.

1.4. Conflicts between home/children spaces and university study

As sole parents, the participants in this research tended to regard their home space as always and already a parenting space. With no other adult at home to assist in boundary maintenance to facilitate a home space that was conducive to studying, the participants were immersed in parental mode at home and this restricted their abilities to study there. Jean has one six year old child and two teenagers at home and is studying a Masters degree part-time. She receivesParenting Payment (Single), works part-time and payment of her child support entitlement is un-reliable. Jean does not receive a scholarship from her university after her applications failed and she describes her current financial position as tenuous. She found it impossible to work at home and as a response to this she began the somewhat unconventional use of university space and time; returning to campus very late at night.

The following quote from Jean describes the difficulty she found in combining parenting and studying in these challenging conditions;

\textit{Michigan:}
Genine: Tell me about how you study at home, with the kids.
Jean: I cannot. (laughs). This is where I feel very disadvantaged. I see all these people, they are able to come to do a bit of research, do some reading, and attend class and all that. Then their core study will be at home, after hours, but I couldn’t do that, at home, it’s my kid’s time.

Genine: You’re in parenting mode?
Jean: Yeah, it’s like, oh my god. Lately, with this unit, what I’ve been doing, what I’ve been doing, now my older two are older, I’ve fed them, read to her, the little one, put her to bed and make sure the other two are doing their homework and all that and then at about 10 pm I came back out and luckily the library is open til 12 pm. Or I study in the postgraduate room.

Genine: So you’re coming back onto campus late?
Jean: Yeah, I had to. I just couldn’t study at home, I start cooking, washing and cleaning and thinking of the next day, everything else except study.

To carve out time to study, Jean leaves her children late at night and returns to her campus to work. Later in the interview she spoke of becoming worried for her safety when she returned to her car in the university car-park after these late night study sessions and this concern had stopped her from continuing this practice.

Jean: I felt a bit scared going back to the car, coming in was okay but coming back out to the car, was, wow, a bit late and that was putting myself at risk, so I didn’t do that too often.

Jean’s decision to return to campus study spaces late at night to work is unviably and problematic. It is indicative of the measures that she felt was necessary in order to access university study spaces in particular ways that fitted into her sole parenting responsibilities.

Another participant concurred with Jean’s experience; that studying at home with children is highly problematic. Michelle told me;

Michelle: I started trying to work from home and it just wasn’t happening. I was doing the washing and all that sort of things instead.

Nina also said she couldn’t work from home, for her it was a financial decision as well as a decision about space.

Genine: But could you, when the kids are at school, work at home, do you have a space at home allocated to research work.
Nina: No
Genine: You come here (on campus) 5 days a week?
Nina: Yep. Apart from the fact it saves a crap load of money on heating the house and cooking the house and all that kind of stuff. So, you know, because I have an office I come in and I use it, which would be why my electricity bill is only $220. (laughs) I can’t work at home, I don’t like it.

These participant responses demonstrate some of the ways in which sole parents navigated through often conflicting and shifting contexts of university and home study spaces. Largely, for these sole parents, home space was allocated to parenting and their ability to work on their postgraduate studies at home was limited. Their performative acts were based on diverse and fluid uses of university and home spaces. This effectively meant that their preferred space to study was university spaces, in spite of and sometimes precisely because they were understood as child-free zones. In this way, university spaces had the potential to (re)produce gendered subjectivities, particularly in relation to sole parents because university spaces are constituted by participants and by academics they work with as child-free. Sole parent postgraduates often shared their university spaces with their children, thereby re-working university spaces, performative acts that un-settled normative constructions of postgraduate students and parental childcare.

2. Conclusion

By examining the performative exchanges and the embedded emotional content of combining sole parenting and postgraduate education, I have sought to demonstrate some of the ways spatial arrangements are (re)productive and regulatory within Australian universities. When the emotional geographies of universities are designated as ‘child-free’ zones, some students with over-determined levels of childcare responsibilities are somewhat limited in their access to and indeed alienated within these educational spaces. Drawing from Butler, performativity demonstrates the ongoing, reiterative and productive acts that demarcate university spaces as ‘child-free’, these acts are only possible within specific power relations and within regulated and normative institutional practices.

In this article I have sought to examine how university spaces are produced as ‘child-free’ and to also consider the implications of this spatial demarcation for particular students such as sole parents. Alternative uses of university spaces can disrupt the category of ‘un-encumbered’ postgraduate student. Within this ongoing process the sole parent postgraduates have the space to act, to act differently and to respond to their conflicting contexts of sole parent and postgraduate/academic.

This research paper contributes to scholarly work which examines parental experiences and spatial operations within the Australian higher education sector. My aim is to contribute to this body of work by considering the experiences of sole parents as a distinctive cohort within higher education. Sole parents represent a significant cohort within the Australian community, a group, I suggest, whose educational aspirations, experiences and outcomes remains under-researched.

I also explore postgraduate education as a particular focus because of this inherent trajectory towards career in the academy and in research. My aim is also to begin to connect a theoretical discussion drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of gendered performativity and relate this framework to parenting and spatial arrangement in higher education. Given that it is overwhelmingly women who care for children, spatial readability is (re)productive of gender categories and is critical in regulating the conditions of engagement with an academic space. A deeper understanding of the emotional geographies of universities can benefit the widening participation project by facilitating and supporting belonging and engagement for under-represented students. Exploring some of the ways geographies of university can alienate or invite engagement and participation for diverse students can be beneficial in increasing equitable access to higher education.

References

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