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Intersecting ethics of responsibility: Childless academic women and their ambivalence in reproductive decision-making

Shelley Zipora Reuter¹

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 1125-19, Concordia University, 1455, boul. de Maisonneuve Ouest, Montreal, QC H3G 1M8, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism has transformed both higher education and society generally; professors are to be self-sufficient, putting the university before everything else, while citizens must care for themselves, so the state does not have to. This creates a tension for academic women, who are least likely among highly educated professional women to have children – a tension between the essentialist imperative that all women embrace motherhood, and the academic imperative that faculty give the university their undivided attention. Drawing from interviews with Canadian academic women about their reproductive decision-making, this article uses Thematic Analysis to develop the concept of “responsible ambivalence” as a framework for understanding their childlessness. It shows how conflicting ethics of responsibility – to the self and to others – intersect and coexist within their accounts and inform the women's reproductive decision-making. In rejecting the ideology of maternal femininity, this article shows how the women's childlessness is consistent with the responsabilizing imperatives of neoliberal academic culture.

“If I could feel like I could have a life and do my job well, my life decisions would have been very different.”

(Evelyn)

Introduction

On February 11, 2015, Pope Francis declared in his weekly address that opting not to have children is selfish (Neuman, 2015). A provocative anthology (Daum, 2015) on voluntary childlessness followed some months later, putting the issue centre stage (Beck, 2015; Gilbert, 2015; Heinrichs, 2015; Khazan, 2015; Linker, 2015; Stevenson, 2015; Wayne, 2015) and adding fuel to the fire was a study showing that fertility among American millennial women was on the decline (Astone, Martin, & Peters, 2015). Canadian data similarly revealed that seniors now outnumber the country's children (Grant & Agius, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2016).

I am interested in women's voluntary childlessness as it relates to neoliberalism. With Shear and Hyatt (2015, 4), I acknowledge the “taken-for-grantedness” of neoliberalism as both a ubiquitous “master signifier” and a supposedly coherent project. Further, with Fine and Saad-Filho, I conceptualize neoliberalism as a new relationship between the economy, state, society, and individuals (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016, 13). In neoliberalism, with its greater financialization, privatization,

and declining state responsibility for social welfare, “the merit of success” and “burden of failure” rest with individuals (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2016, 13); that is, they are responsabilized to look after themselves in service to the greater good (Reuter, 2016, 57).

This cultural shift has affected academic women's reproductive decision-making. As Gill observes, for women who want children, “increasing numbers feel unable to do so and sustain an academic career... because...the...time it takes to get a secure job...makes it too late, or because the intense...demands of contemporary academic employment make it extremely difficult to manage” (Gill, 2010, 234). North American academics, for example, are less likely to have children than other highly educated professional women (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013, 65; Robbins, 2004). This paper seeks to understand why in critical, sociological terms.

Because universities have adopted neoliberal “management” strategies, academic women's childlessness must be examined in the context of a neoliberal agenda that is “at odds with ideals of discovery, enquiry and intellectual advancement” (Fanghanel, 2012, 82). Using Thematic Analysis, I draw from interviews with Canadian academic women to examine their childlessness through the conceptual framework of responsibility and ambivalence. I dispute the perception of childlessness as selfish and motherhood as something all “normal” women want. I also reject the idea that choosing motherhood is morally preferable; indeed, I question the very notion of “choice” itself, because

E-mail address: shelley.reuter@concordia.ca.

¹ I use the term “childless,” but acknowledge that some would prefer the equally valid term “childfree.”

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“the choices...academic subjects make stem not...from the individual alone, as...free decisions to realize one's dreams, but from the conditions of possibility within...institutional arrangements” (Brunila & Valero, 2018, 84).

I demonstrate that seemingly conflicting ethics of responsibility to the self and others intersect and coexist within the women's accounts. Invoking “responsible ambivalence,” I offer a more complex explanation for their childlessness, showing that in a neoliberal context, responsibility to the self is inextricable from responsibility to others. I first provide background to my argument and consider the neoliberal turn in academia. I then introduce the concept of ambivalence, particularly in relation to academic motherhood. Following a discussion of method, I present the interviews, arguing that the ambivalence inherent in the women's childlessness is consistent with the responsabilizing imperatives of neoliberal academic culture.

Background

The women in this study gave accounts of their childlessness that were framed by seemingly opposed ethics of responsibility: an ethics of responsibility to the self (career aspirations; financial independence; attention to their limitations and needs), and an ethics of responsibility to others (eldercare; potential child's best interests). They most clearly demonstrated the latter when discussing their commitment to succeed as scholars, colleagues, and university employees.

My analysis builds on Currie's study of reproductive decision-making (Currie, 1988). Her respondents, a mix of childless, pregnant, and childed women (of varying professions), expressed ambivalence about becoming mothers, citing a particular “configuration of material circumstances” as the “right time” for motherhood (240): job and financial security; a suitable relationship and home; and personal maturity (243). Currie's findings suggest that ambivalence in reproductive decision-making has a history preceding neoliberalism and exceeding the university context; however, she and I do not define “ambivalence” similarly. She emphasizes the structural roots of her respondents' ambivalent feelings, while I emphasize the ethics of responsibility framing my respondents' decision-making. These ethics are particular to a neoliberal mode of living and although Currie acknowledges the “personalization of responsibility for problems generated by structural process” (250), she does not explore responsabilization per se, and neither does she examine how attending to one's own needs and preferences (i.e., responsibility to the self) has, under neoliberalism, become the way to be responsible to others. Finally, because Currie does not restrict her sample to academic women, she cannot make any claims about the exigencies of an academic career. Yet, these are important for understanding what it is about academia that makes academic women less likely to have children.

Wegar's (1992) study of adoptees' ambivalence towards obtaining identifying information about their birth parents also informs my analysis. She interprets their accounts as evidence of conflicting but intersecting “moral vocabularies.” I share Wegar's interest in the “interplay of motives,” but do not adopt her theoretical and methodological objectives. Instead, I focus on what responsible ambivalence reveals about contemporary social relations; I show that ambivalence derives from the neoliberal imperative that individuals take responsibility for the state of their own lives. This behest presents a tension for academic women – between having children “as a real woman does” and not having them “because a real scholar doesn't.”

Prevailing Judeo-Christian culture in the West has always elevated responsibility to others as morally superior to prioritizing one's self. Yet caring for the self – so others do not have to – has become the means to fulfilling that responsibility. As neoliberalism becomes more entrenched, so too does the expectation that individuals look after their own well-being for the greater good. Higher education is one sector that has sanctioned this “neoliberal way.”

Neoliberalism and the rise of “Corporate U”

Shear and Hyatt describe how the “neoliberal fantasy of unbridled market competition via the marketisation of knowledge provides the ideological terrain” for the massive changes in higher education seen in recent decades. Universities are showing the effects of restructuring and are further restructuring “through discursive and material transformations that are reshaping institutional objectives, influencing the nature of academic practice, and instilling new beliefs, affects and desires in students, faculty and administrators” (Shear & Hyatt, 2015, 2). They situate the neoliberal university as a site of hegemonic struggles “thoroughly implicated and embroiled in processes of economic and cultural production” (3). Along with health and social welfare, neoliberal policies, characterized by free market rhetoric and instrumentalist rationality, have targeted the education sector directly (Lorenz, 2012, 599). “New Public Management” has led to worsening faculty/student ratios, increasing part-time and precarious labour, decreasing tenure and tenure-track faculty, and growing dissociation of teaching from research (605–6).

Gill connects these outcomes with individual experience, highlighting how academia epitomizes the neoliberalization of the workplace. She argues that academics have turned into individual, responsible “model neoliberal subjects” simply “too exhausted to resist” the transformation despite its consequences: insecurity, stress, anxiety, and toxic shame (Gill, 2010). Giroux recounts the individualism and competitiveness of “bare pedagogy” and the “neoliberal framing of public and higher education” by a corporate ideology that reduces universities to “job-training sites” through standardized curricula and top-down management (Giroux, 2010, 185). He eschews this corporate turn, imploring educators to reclaim the university. Other scholars also advocate resistance against what the university has become (Mountz et al., 2015; Zerilli & Heatherington, 2016; Rustin, 2016; Heatherington, 2017).

Berg and Seeber condemn today's “administrative” university for abandoning the “long-honoured aims” of higher education (Berg & Seeber, 2016, ix). I include among these the fostering of critical thinking about important issues; academia has veered from such cerebral pursuits towards neoliberal managerialism (cf. Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007), with administrators increasingly emphasizing faculty accountability (Tuchman, 2009). Indeed, “effacement of the role of the professor” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, 3–4) is now typical of universities, which have been reconceptualized as engines of economic – rather than intellectual, educational, scientific and cultural – growth (Collini, 2012). In this results-driven environment, “student evaluation metrics,” teaching innovation, and the performance of teaching, along with research publishing culture and entrepreneurial career planning, contribute to the “everyday neoliberalism” of academia today (Cannizzo, 2018, 6–7). A “technique of governance” has emerged as a powerful “strategy of subjectivation” (Denzin & Giardina, 2017, 5). The result of this new “audit culture” (5) is anxiety among university educators, which administrations see as a “personal problem or deficit” (Brunila & Valero, 2018, 77). Indeed, a “form of subjectivity articulated in an economic logic” (76) of benchmarks, bibliometrics, and performance indicators perpetuates an “ethos of vulnerability” (84–5) in the academy.

The growing demands of academia and an “acceleration of time in which we are expected to do more and more” (Mountz et al., 2015) mean that most ordinary faculty – “managed academics” (Fanghanel, 2012, 15) – do not have the luxury of time to pursue knowledge for its own sake. This is especially true for those in precarious employment.² The demand for efficiency in the high-yield “information factory” (Role,

² Research Chairs do enjoy this privilege, and regular full-time faculty have more time than part-timers, however limited. I thank Marc Lafrance for pointing this out.

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