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COMMENTARY

Care and the academy: Navigating fieldwork, funding and care responsibilities

Rosie Cox¹  | Jessica Hope²  | Katy Jenkins³  | Charlotte Ray⁴

¹School of Social Sciences, Birkbeck University of London, London, UK

²School of Geography and Sustainable Development, St Andrews, UK

³Department of Geography, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

⁴Faculty of Engineering, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

Correspondence

Rosie Cox, School of Social Sciences, Birkbeck University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX, UK.

Email: r.cox@bbk.ac.uk

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Abstract

This commentary reflects on research jointly conducted by the Development Geographies Research Group (DevGRG) and the Gender and Feminist Geographies Research Group (GFGRG) of the RGS-IBG, which aimed to understand the challenges faced by academics with care responsibilities. We set out the effects of research funding policies and practices on researchers' ability to combine careers as academic geographers with care responsibilities, highlighting the specific effects in a field-based subject such as Geography. We gathered data about a range of research funders' policies and how these are implemented (in various ways) in UK Geography departments. We also surveyed all UK university Geography departments to understand experiences of parental and adoption leave, including support from employers, impacts on career progression, and recommendations for support. Our data show that there is a need for a more consistent and comprehensive approach to recognising the costs of academics' caring responsibilities, to support their career progression and to mitigate the impacts disproportionately experienced by women. Funders and higher education institutes (HEIs) need to work collaboratively to develop policies and practices to address the individualised way in which (predominantly female) academics currently experience navigating the provision of funding for parental leave, and for covering costs of care during fieldwork. Our research highlights the need for consistent and progressive policies in relation to care and parental leave across all funding bodies – that can subsequently be embedded into institutional frameworks – in order to provide equity and consistency for staff across the UK higher education (HE) sector. We also emphasise the need for these policies to be more visible and transparent, making the task of navigating them more manageable for staff at an often uncertain time in their working lives.

KEYWORDS

academia, care, childcare, fieldwork, research funding

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1 | INTRODUCTION

This commentary reflects on a small project conducted jointly by the Development Geographies Research Group (DevGRG) and the Gender and Feminist Geographies Research Group (GFGRG) of the RGS-IBG, which aimed to understand the challenges faced by UK-based academics with care responsibilities (including but not limited to childcare). In this agenda-setting piece, we focus on research funding policies and practices around fieldwork, highlighting the effects of funding on the careers of people with caring responsibilities in Geography – a field-based subject. In the UK it is against the law to discriminate against somebody (directly or indirectly) based on their gender, if they are pregnant or on maternity leave; there are also specific protections for breast-feeding mothers (GOV.UK, 2023). However, COVID reminded us that care responsibilities remain gendered within academia (GFGRG, 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2021), as are the effects of such responsibilities on careers. In this commentary, we identify a gap in policy for fieldwork funding and show the need for consistent, clear and progressive policies in relation to care responsibilities across all funding bodies. These need to be embedded into institutional frameworks to ensure equity for staff across the UK higher education (HE) sector. We emphasise the need for these policies to be visible and transparent, making the task of navigating them more manageable for staff at an often uncertain time in their working lives.

Fieldwork is central to being a geographer. To abandon research plans, lines of enquiry or whole geographic regions once you have a child or need to care for a relative is potentially disastrous to research trajectories. Therefore, policies and practices which adversely impact access to fieldwork can become significant barriers to career progression. This has been highlighted by researchers in another field-based subject – geomorphology. Lininger et al. (2021) show the pressures on geomorphology careers during pregnancy and early motherhood, including the crucial need for childcare costs to be acknowledged and met by both funders and HE institutions. Beyond this, there is a small and geographically broad literature on fieldwork and care. However, the focus is on how parenting changes fieldwork (Drozdowski & Robinson, 2015) and conferences (Bos et al., 2019) and not on other types of care, for example of elderly parents or amongst academics who may themselves have additional needs that add to fieldwork costs. Geographers are starting to organise around the issue of inequalities and fieldwork. Beyond DevGRG and GFGRG events, there has been a one-day symposium at the University of Oxford¹ and there is now a Network of Women Doing Fieldwork (NWDF).² We add to this a discussion of the ways in which the policies and practices surrounding external research funding impact those with caring responsibilities in a field-based subject. We highlight variations amongst institutions and staff groups, conflicts and confusions between funder and institutional policies, and the opacity of policies which can add extra stress at an already stressful time.

We situate our commentary in relation to acknowledged trends in academia, including increasing precarity and casualisation of the academic workforce (Caretta et al., 2018; Thwaites & Pressland, 2017), persistent gender inequalities (Allen & Savigny, 2016), and a growing recognition of the ways in which care responsibilities affect academic life (Hope et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2020). Figure 1, though dated, illustrates trends in gender disparity and seniority for Geography (Maddrell et al., 2016).

2 | WHAT WE'VE DONE

In 2018, DevGRG hosted a session at the RGS-IBG Conference, where parents talked about how they balance their careers with parenting. Fieldwork emerged as a key topic, specifically that many people experienced it as a disappearing opportunity. This group subsequently published a co-authored viewpoint on the topic (Hope et al., 2020). DevGRG then partnered with GFGRG and obtained support from the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) to carry out a workshop and survey on care more broadly. At the workshop participants explored how different UK funders and HEIs allow funding to be used to cover additional care costs arising from field research. We systematically reviewed university and funder websites for policies on care costs and silences. Participants also shared personal experiences, ideas for how care and care costs could be covered, and engaged in critical discussions around how to bring about change and challenge/acknowledge larger structural issues such as precarity in academia. The second stage involved surveying UK university Geography departments. A survey was circulated by the RGS to Heads of Department with a request that it be shared with all staff. It asked a series of questions around experiences of parental and adoption leave, including support from employers, impacts on career progression and recommendations for support. Results from the survey are not reported in detail here, but many similar themes arose surrounding confusion about responsibilities between funder and HEI, increased administrative burdens for researchers with care responsibilities and inconsistencies between and within institutions. Additional issues will be covered in a separate piece focused on parental leave.

Table 1 Number and percentage of UK higher education participants who are female; staff by academic grade and students by level of study

Academic grade	1978	1988	2007/08	2012/13
<i>Students</i>				
Undergraduate	42% (3194)	44% (2872)	49% (11 311)	50% (11 925)
Masters	29% (79)	35% (97)	47% (1174)	52% (1332)
PhD – full-time	31% (155)	32% (135)		
PhD – part-time	20% (63)	34% (59)		
PhD – all			49% (629)	50% (670)
<i>Staff</i>				
Research and Teaching Assistants				55% (235)
Lecturers			38% (175)	
Researchers			49% (210)	
Lecturers and Researchers				48% (315)
Lecturers and Senior Lecturers	8% (38)	11% (58)		
Senior Lecturers and Researchers			26% (120)	33% (305)
Readers	6% (4)	7% (4)		
Professors	4% (3.5)	4% (5)	.. (50)	21% (65)
Other grades			37% (90)	
Other junior grades/administrative				71% (265)
Other senior grades/managerial				.. (20)
<i>Total staff (male and female)</i>	<i>620</i>	<i>686</i>	<i>1910</i>	<i>2745</i>

Sources: 1978: McDowell (1979) (0.5 values to reflect FTE status); 1988: McDowell and Peake (1990); 2007/08 HESA Student record (F8: Physical Geographical Sciences and L7: Human and Social Geography) (HESA 2010b); 2007/08: HESA Staff Record (28: Geography) (HESA 2010a); 2012/13 HESA Student record (F8 and L7) (HESA 2015); 2012/13: HESA Staff Record (124: Geography and Environmental Studies) (HESA 2014).¹ HESA Standard Rounding Methodology was applied to the Staff Record data (shown as Full Person Equivalent, FPE) to prevent the disclosure of confidential or personal information, which may mean that some FPE counts do not sum to the rounded total and percentages calculated on a population of 0 to 52 persons are suppressed, indicated by [...]. Student record subject codes are not precise categories and include students studying related subjects outside geography departments

FIGURE 1 Number and percentage of UK higher education participants who are female; staff by academic grade and students by level of study (from Maddrell et al. 2016).

3 | WHAT WE FOUND

Our small project yielded rich data about the myriad ways in which care responsibilities affect careers and that careers in turn affect people's ability to care. Here, we explore the unrecognised impacts of rules and practices around research funding. We highlight the intertwining responsibilities of funders and HEIs to both offer and implement funding that supports staff with care responsibilities.

We found substantial differences amongst funders and universities in their policies and practices around paying for care. Some funders explicitly allow for funding to cover care costs such as taking young children on fieldwork, or additional childcare costs incurred by the primary carer being away from home for fieldwork. Other funders do not allow such costs, whilst some might, if you have the confidence to ask, but do not explicitly mention them. This is captured in [Table 1](#).

Despite commitments from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and other funders to cover care costs related to fieldwork, researchers face an additional hurdle, in that many institutions do not allow these costs to be claimed from these funds, or that they conflict with existing institutional policies (such as insurance). Finding a funder who will cover additional costs is only a first step. We identified a vicious circle whereby funders will allow for care costs to be included if institutions allow this, and institutions' policies allow such costs to be claimed if funders allow it. The result is not only patchy and very unfair provision, but also opacity, confusion and frustration. This suggests that finding, navigating and successfully implementing these policies requires a level of confidence, prior knowledge and support that some researchers (especially early career and/or those on precarious contracts) may not have. This means, for example, that the costs of taking a child on fieldwork must be met by the family, or fieldwork abandoned until parents can leave their children (and afford the costs of this).

TABLE 1 Care costs and travel funding.

Funding body	Policy	Clarity
UKRI (within this, ESRC, AHRC, BBSRC, EPSRC, Innovate UK, STFC, NERC & Research England)	The costs of additional childcare, beyond that required to meet the normal contracted requirements of the job and which are directly related to the project, may be requested as a directly incurred cost if the institutional policy is to reimburse them. However, childcare costs associated with normal working patterns may not be sought.	Costings information Section E Standard Terms and Conditions of Grant Guidance Index
British Academy	New scheme for Additional Needs. Opened February 2023 ‘The British Academy’ has set aside specific funding to support any additional needs that applicants and award holders may require. This funding would be in addition to the amount already requested for research expenses. Each request will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Some examples of what may be considered for this funding are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific equipment to overcome barriers to people with disabilities undertaking research. • Assistance to allow applicants living with sensory impairment to carry out their research. • Bids for the cost of child, parent or other caring responsibilities may be considered if the carer is conducting research away from home and it is not possible to make alternative arrangements. • The costs of normal regular care whilst at home are not eligible for support. 	https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/additional-needs/
British Society for Geomorphology Carer Support Grant	To help carers undertake dedicated geomorphology-related academic activities (e.g. attending conferences, meetings, workshops; or conducting field-based research; or partaking in national/international internship) that they might not otherwise be able to undertake because of their care responsibilities.	
Carnegie Trust for Universities of Scotland	Not specified	Care costs not listed as an ineligible costs and eligible costs includes vague ‘other research costs, as deemed appropriate by the Trust.’
Leverhulme Trust	Only mention is for Early Career Fellowship: The Trust will support requests to hold the award part-time over a proportionately longer period for health-related reasons, disability or childcare commitments. Those holding the Fellowship part time may not undertake any other employment during the period of the award.	NOT an ineligible cost: But not specified
Royal Academy of Engineering	Mention of two policies: Childcare and Caring Costs Support Guidance: ‘The Academy has Childcare and Caring Costs Support Guidance, which is shared with awardees. This covers additional childcare or caring costs that arise when attending the Academy’s organised training courses or invited talks directly related to their awards. This guidance is also applicable to Academy Fellows or invited guests when attending the Academy’s invited meetings or events (e.g. reviewer and interview panel meetings, workshop or conferences)’. Caring Responsibilities Policy: ‘The Academy can provide up to £2000 over the course of the internship for additional expenses which will cover costs of caring responsibilities (e.g. childcare), in accordance with the Academy’s caring responsibilities policy. If required, you will need to complete an expenses claim form and submit it directly to the Academy along with any relevant documentation, receipts, and invoices. This will only be required when caring expenses are incurred’.	No direct link to access the policies mentioned. Information noted as part of the Researcher Development Concordat and RAE internship guidance notes .

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Funding body	Policy	Clarity
Royal Society	Royal Society Childcare Travel Policy <£2000 financial support to Research Fellows for any additional childcare costs that arise when attending conferences, collaborative research visits or invited talks directly related to their fellowship or award (not fieldwork).	On their website under Grants Policies. (Childcare Travel Policy)
Royal Society for Edinburgh	Not specified	
Wellcome Trust	Caring responsibility costs. You can also claim costs to cover caring responsibilities if you or any staff employed on your grant attend a conference. This includes childcare and any other caring responsibility you have, provided: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wellcome is paying your salary • the conference is directly related to your grant • the costs are over and above what you would normally pay for care • the conference organiser and your employing organisation are unable to cover the costs. You can claim up to £1000 per person for each conference to cover caring costs.	Very easy to find and clear but for conferences only. Does not say they will not cover it but is not clear for fieldwork.

At the workshop we discussed the different care responsibilities participants had and the different ways in which funders and HEIs would need to respond to these. Most discussion was around childcare and the need for funders to recognise the needs of children of different ages, different families and children with additional needs. We also acknowledged that children are not the only people geographers may need to care for and that appropriate care for dependent adults varies greatly and may be particularly difficult to organise or provide. One geographer, Professor Ann Varley, who was unable to attend the workshop, wrote to us saying, 'Taking an infirm parent on fieldwork is obviously not an option. But covering the cost of paying someone to take over one's caring responsibilities for them while they were away for a few weeks/months – if it were possible for someone else to do it – could be' (see also Varley, 2008).

Our discussions led to the formulation of the 'gold standard for travel funding' (DevGRG, 2019), as well as to the RGS changing their policy to allow grant-holders to claim for childcare-related costs.³ This is a step forward and provides a model for other funders but still leaves the question of other forms of care unaddressed.

Academics can be unable to do fieldwork, unless they can self-fund to cover care responsibilities at home or childcare in the field. In many field sites this is not as straightforward as paying for a nursery. It requires finding someone who can travel with the researcher in the field. The lack of clear policy demands additional enquiries and administrative tasks, as well as the confidence to budget for childcare costs on competitive grant applications. Clearer guidance is thus needed from institutions and funders to address these gendered inequalities.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

Our data show that there is a need for a more consistent and comprehensive approach to fieldwork funding and academics' caring responsibilities, to enable equitable career progression and to mitigate these impacts disproportionately experienced by women. Funders and HEIs need to work collaboratively to develop policies and practices to address the individualised way in which (predominantly female) academics currently experience navigating the provision of funding to cover costs of care during fieldwork. We need to combat the vicious circle that prevents additional funding being accessible with more coherent policies, shared examples of best practices and more acknowledgement of those losing out. Our research highlights the need for guidance to be clear and easy to find, and practice to be consistent, across the sector. Research offices within universities must also become cognisant of the challenges outlined above and be encouraged to address these more consistently through including care costs within grant applications. The 'gold standard' for funders, developed by DevGRG and GFGRG as a result of this research, provides a starting point for these initiatives.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Rosie Cox  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2830-7234>

Jessica Hope  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8726-8880>

Katy Jenkins  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9174-3648>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 'Who Cares? The (in)visibility of caring responsibilities and working in Geography' workshop, School of Geography and the Environment, Oxford University, 10 January 2019.
- ² women.fieldwork@jisc.ac.uk. Contact Dr Ana Laura Zavala Guillen, (a.l.zavalaguillen@bham.ac.uk), Itzel San Roman-Pineda (isanroman-pineda1@sheffield.ac.uk) or Jennifer Lidia Veenstra (jlveenstra1@sheffield.ac.uk).
- ³ The costs of additional childcare, beyond that required to meet the normal contracted requirements of the job, and that are directly related to the field elements of the project, may be requested as a directly incurred cost. However, childcare costs associated with normal working patterns may not be sought. <https://www.rgs.org/in-the-field/in-the-field-grants/advice-and-resources/conditions-of-grants/>.

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