

Mothers and researchers in the making: Negotiating ‘new’ motherhood within the ‘new’ academia

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Abstract

How do early-career academic mothers balance the demands of contemporary motherhood and academia? More generally, how do working mothers develop their embodied selves in today’s highly competitive working life? This article responds to a recent call to voice maternal experiences in the field of organization studies. Inspired by matricentric feminism and building on our intimate autoethnographic diary notes, we provide a fine-grained understanding of the changing demands that constitute the ongoing negotiation of ‘new’ motherhood within the ‘new’ academia. By highlighting the complexity of embodied experience, we show how motherhood is not an entirely negative experience in the workplace. Despite academia’s neoliberal tendencies, the social privilege of whiteness, heterosexuality and the middle class enables – at times – simultaneous satisfaction with both motherhood and an academic career.

Keywords

autoethnography, early-career academics, embodied experience, matricentric feminism, motherhood

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Introduction

‘Oh, congratulations, but how are you going to finalize your PhD study now?’, a friend asked me when I told her I was going to have a baby. I felt a mixture of irritation and offense flowing through my pregnant body, and I promptly answered, ‘I don’t know yet, but I know I will organize it somehow!’ (Rose)

It was never self-evident for me to desire children. Was 29-year-old me suddenly feeling the biological clock ticking (oh, what a horrible and repressive expression!), or was I suddenly aware of the culturally *learned* desire for children? What would happen to me as an academic if I got pregnant? It all felt utterly confusing and still quite exciting, given that I had never changed a diaper in my life. (Anna)

I was afraid that ‘everything would be different’ after having a baby, as the nurse at the maternity clinic had told me and which I didn’t want to happen. I was happy with my life as it was, and therefore I navigated between the thoughts of joy and anxiety when envisioning what my (academic) life would be like with a baby. (Rose)

This is an autoethnographic article written by two mothers(-to-be) and early-career researchers working in Finnish academia. In this article, we¹ openly explore how we negotiate lived maternal experiences within the ever-changing and seemingly disembodied expectations of the ‘new’ academia, as well as ‘traditional’ motherhood (e.g. DiQuinzio, 1999; Hays, 1996). What kind of place is the ‘new’ academia, with its ever-increasing neoliberal demands for productivity (Anderson, 2008: 258; see also Lund, 2012; Tienari, 2012), for bodies with caregiving duties *and* career aspirations,² or bodies that produce ‘menstrual blood, breast milk and maternal smells’ (Höpfel, 2003: 6)? How do particular embodied experiences struggle with and negotiate the seemingly disembodied ideals of an ‘elitist’ knowledge-work setting? Thus, the focus of this article is how we, as white, middle-class, heterosexual mothers(-to-be) working in a (privileged) Finnish academic context, negotiate these fluctuating complexities.

Motherhood is fundamentally a thick, bodily experience that engages ‘sensory’ selves. Lived maternal experiences have arguably remained undertheorized in the field of organization studies (apart from Gatrell, 2014; Höpfel, 2000, 2003; Tyler, 2000). Likewise, approaches to academic work as embodied are limited (Bell and Sinclair, 2014). Becoming a mother is an intense embodied experience that often renders a woman vulnerable, stigmatized or hypervisible in the workplace (e.g. Gatrell, 2013, 2014; Hennekam, 2016). The opening extracts illustrate the sentiments of anxiety that may be experienced by future mothers in academic careers. They also indicate how becoming a mother not only shapes a woman’s subjectivity and self-perception but also affects how she is perceived by others. Interestingly, the determination Rose expresses to sort things out herself constructs motherhood as a woman’s individual ‘problem’ to solve in a neoliberal setting, and less a structural issue that shapes mothers-to-be across different workplace contexts.

Research has long shown that female academics continue to battle gendered beliefs and stereotypes in developing sustainable careers (Armenti, 2004; Fotaki, 2013; Johansson and Šliwa, 2013; King, 2008; Pas et al., 2014; Toffoletti and Starr, 2016). In academia, pregnancy is arguably largely considered unprofessional, and maternal bodies are usually abject (Biehl-Missal, 2014; Gatrell, 2014; Kristeva and Goldhammer, 1985;

Mäkelä, 2009; Tyler, 2009). Before having children, both authors feared becoming 'othered' in academia owing to motherhood, a common fear among mothers-to-be (Nikunen, 2012; Warren and Brewis, 2004). To us, academic motherhood seemed filled with conflicting ideals and expectations (Badinter, 2010), which we found – and still find – difficult to navigate (Biese, 2013; see also Blair-Loy, 2003).

To us, motherhood includes the embodied and emotional transformations of 'becoming' a mother in the workplace (Gatrell, 2013). In this article, 'new' motherhood refers to the ways in which discourses around motherhood have shifted in the West over the past few decades and the ways in which (hetero)normative, repressing and rather static ideals surrounding motherhood can be challenged. Traditional ideals of motherhood are deeply rooted in religion and the myth of the Virgin Mary (Kristeva, 1985) and the cultural meanings of women as primary caregivers and 'producers of the nation' (Ainsworth and Cutcher, 2008: 379), as well as the ideology of men as 'breadwinners' (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011: 523; Gherardi, 1995). The 'new' here represents a willingness to break with oppressive mothering ideologies (e.g. DiQuinzio, 1999; Hays, 1996) and strive for gender equality. We view motherhood as a shared caring practice in a context of shared parenthood that intensely involves partners, other caring agents and support structures crucial to enabling us to live a life on our own terms and to develop our careers (see Heikkinen et al., 2014). To us, 'new' motherhood thus plays an important part in feeding our sense of our self and – in a more empowering spirit – broadening our personal space both at work and at home.

In this article, we strive to provide fine-grained insights into the embodied experiences of 'new' motherhood in the 'new' Finnish academia. This aim urges us to reflect on how we can understand, represent and write about the complexities of *lived* embodied experiences (see also Pullen, 2018) and be reflexive about our own subject position, as different women are 'hooked up differently to the institutional order of academia' (Lund, 2012: 226). Our shifting, multiple and sometimes contradictory subjectivities as mothers and researchers are never stable. By the 'new' academia, we refer to an intensely controlled, standardized, entrepreneurial and arguably neoliberal masculine working context (see, for example, Czarniawska and Genell, 2002; Huzzard et al., 2017; Kallio et al., 2016; Lund, 2012).

We write as early-career researchers, often defined as individuals whose doctorates were awarded within the past five years (Bazeley, 2003), which provides a unique viewpoint on existing discussions of academic motherhood (e.g. Fotaki, 2013; Nikunen, 2012, 2014) and the contemporary characteristics of academic work (e.g. Tienari, 2012; see also Gregg, 2008, 2015; Lund, 2015). Our position is *situated*, both socio-culturally and historically (e.g. Pullen, 2006), and relationally 'done, undone and re-done' (Pecis, 2016: 2123), in the everyday interactions in the Finnish academic context. Multiple social categories such as gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, age, nationality and class, as well as our own academic disciplines and organizations, shape our experiences and the expectations we speak of here. Our analysis shows how these categories mutually constitute our fluctuating embodied experiences. Also, the complexity of Finland's academic context deserves to be addressed in this article. Because university education in Finland is, in principle, free and equally accessible for all, the Finnish academy is itself a privileged working context.

Although plenty has been written on women's work-life balance in academia (e.g. Toffoletti and Starr, 2016), we know less about how early-career researchers *perform* maternal and professional tensions in their 'earthy' everyday lives (apart from Lund, 2012, 2015). This seems surprising given that the most vulnerable period for a female academic is early in her career (Mason et al., 2013). Early-career researchers thus are in a fragile phase of fighting for funding, as the 'entrepreneurial' culture in academia is highly competitive, both in Finland and abroad (Nikunen, 2014: 121; see also Bazeley, 2003: 257; Laudel and Gläser, 2008). Also, this period is often thought of as a phase of 'breaking or making it' (Mason et al., 2013; see also Mirick and Wladkowski, 2018), in which one is expected to be intensely productive.

Becoming a mother is also 'a fundamental issue for feminism, involving a specific set of psychological processes and psychic changes that are hard to access through available language and discourses', as Hollway (2016: 137) suggests. This article is inspired by feminist thinking and matricentric feminism, today represented in theory, practice and activism (e.g. O'Reilly, 2016). Arguably, matricentric theory has remained underdeveloped in the field of organization studies and is surprisingly overlooked in women's studies and feminist theories, as well (see O'Reilly, 2016). Rooted in an ethics of care framework (England, 2005; Pullen, 2006) and a striving for justice and change, this article demonstrates how insights from matricentric theory could invite further critical reflection in the field of organization studies, as well as help us advocate change in the academy.

This article is structured as follows. First, we explore the literature on maternal embodiment and the 'new' academia before using it to analyze our autoethnographic research material. In our analysis, we make connections between our personal experiences and existing research in the field of organization studies. We highlight the complexity of embodied experience and provide a fine-grained understanding of the ongoing negotiation of 'new' motherhood within the 'new' academia. We conclude by discussing the implications of academia's neoliberal tendencies for different motherhoods and present promising areas for future research.

Messy and fleshy maternal experiences in the 'new' academia

Existing views on embodied experiences of motherhood

Embodied experiences of motherhood have been marginalized in the field of organization studies, although they are relatively well researched in the social sciences more broadly (see, for example, Badinter, 2010; Faulkner, 2014; Hollway, 2016). In much of this literature in organization studies (see, for example, Kanji and Cahusac, 2015; Millward, 2006; see also Hennekam, 2016), motherhood is portrayed as an identity process of 'becoming'. Oakley's (1979) classic study *Becoming a Mother* portrays the fundamental transition in a woman's private and professional life. In organization studies, women's identity transitions during pregnancy have also been studied (Hennekam, 2016; Ladge et al., 2012). Other objects of concern have included negotiating breastfeeding in the workplace (e.g. Armenti, 2004; Riad, 2007; Turner and Norwood, 2014; van

Amsterdam, 2015), women's struggles to balance their careers and mothering roles (Biese, 2013; Buzzanell and Liu, 2007; Faulkner, 2012), women's experiences of working in contemporary organizations (Lewis, 2014; Lund, 2012; Nikunen, 2014), maternal employment (Holmes et al., 2012) and male parenting (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Yoshida, 2012).

The maternal body,³ then, is frequently said to represent a problematic site of self-regulation, discipline, abjection and social exclusion (Gatrell, 2014). For instance, the physicality of the maternal body (which is not a universal body, in any sense) has largely been too threatening for mainstream organization theory to handle (Höpfl, 2003), and our article strives to address this thrilling tension. Experiences of exhaustion, discomfort and anxiety are often attached to representations of the maternal body and motherhood more broadly (e.g. Faulkner, 2014; Pas et al., 2014). In much of the literature (e.g. Buzzanell and Liu, 2007; Faulkner, 2014; Holmes et al., 2012), feelings of discomfort and anxiety are emphasized over more positive sensations such as maternal pride, joy and empowerment. To us, it appears as if the 'weaknesses' typically attached to the maternal body contribute to maintaining its abjection and 'otherness'. Rather than accepting that motherhood only renders women docile, weak or sick (Gatrell, 2013; Mäkelä, 2009; Morgan et al., 2013), we critically ask if motherhood could be a transformative practice that strengthens and develops mothers as professionals, too. We also want to believe that becoming a mother in the workplace could be a 'feminist choice' (Oliver, 2010).

We approach embodiment as the sensation of inhabiting a body that moves and feels (Noland, 2009), and agree with Adamson and Johansson (2016: 2204), who write that embodiment is 'key to understanding the lived experiences of professional work'. Also, we approach embodied experiences as closely attached to the notion of embodied agency. Here, we view agency as self-assertion and reaching beyond the (bodily) limits produced by cultural norms and expectations (Satama and Huopalaainen, 2016). To us, the individual can act despite being constrained by surrounding norms, structures and societal expectations.

Motherhood is an intriguing scholarly topic with links to embodiment, the performance of gender, materiality, affectivity, femininity and sexuality, as well as power, structural issues and patriarchal oppression. In line with Holloway (1999: 91), we approach motherhood as a constructed and contested experience and practice 'intimately bound up with normative ideas' about female embodiment and the performance of femininity. Feminist research problematizes motherhood as 'natural', or as a biological calling to women, and views it as a gendered and cultural construct (e.g. Butler, 1989; Kinser, 2010). Specifically, feminist motherhood research suggests that western motherhood is largely shaped by heterosexual nuclear family ideals and a striving to simultaneously perform different successful femininities (De Benedictis and Orgad, 2017); motherhood 'subsumes assimilated cultural awareness of how a mother ought to act' (Krok, 2009: 10; see also McRobbie, 2013, 2015).

For us, it is important to distinguish the category of 'mother' from the category of 'woman'. Although motherhood matters to us and constructs our subjectivity, the reduction of women to the sphere of motherhood is hugely problematic. Not all women want or should want to have children, and not everyone can have children; we wish to be ethically aware in this regard. We want to move away from oppressive, constraining and

stereotypical assumptions about women 'needing' motherhood to complete them (see also Oliver, 1993). To Kristeva (2005: 2), however, '[t]he mother is at the crossroads of biology and meaning'. Although Kristeva's work on motherhood and subjectivity has been criticized by other feminists for presenting an essentialist view of motherhood (e.g. Butler, 1989), it has been hugely influential (Kristeva, 2005; Kristeva and Goldhammer, 1985). What we find intriguing about Kristeva's (2005) work is its emphasis on the affectivity, intensity and physicality of the maternal body as central to debates about motherhood, which cannot be ignored in the context of this article.

To make sense of the complexities of motherhood, including femininity and masculinity as performance, we acknowledge Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity as the repetition of stylized acts that are simultaneously 'intentional and performative' (Butler, 1988: 522). Specifically, Butler focuses on how discourses contribute to the formation of the subject. We become gendered subjects through our 'sayings' and 'doings', and in this sense, gendered ideals about motherhood are also reproduced *in* and *through* our own gender performativity, bodily gestures, repetition of acts and interactional activities in a specific context. Conceptions of motherhood are dynamically shaped and negotiated by a variety of practices, discourses, norms, ideals and social expectations. For example, mothers might operate within discourses that tell them that they should breastfeed 'in order to be *good* mothers, but they should strictly limit where and how long they do so or risk being defined as *bad* mothers' (Norwood and Turner, 2013: 84, emphasis added). In this sense, gendered norms about breastfeeding are reproduced *in* and *through* the act of breastfeeding.

In contemporary western society, the intensive mothering ideology and the essential motherhood ideology (see Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1996) expect mothers to fully devote themselves to nurturing their children, making it difficult to combine family duties with a career. From these perspectives, 'appropriate mothering' is positioned as 'child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996: 8). Multiple cultural ideals in contemporary western society also contribute to shaping our understandings of motherhood. In contemporary British culture, for instance, the 'yummy mummy' has become a powerful symbol for the well-groomed, high-consuming and attractive modern mother (Littler, 2013). This ideal reproduces certain (limited) expectations about heteronormative western sexualization and ultra-feminine motherhood. Arguably, this kind of socio-culturally defined categorization renders visible problematic relations between motherhood, sexuality and female embodiment.

Parenthood and work are gendered constructions (Ainsworth and Cutcher, 2008). Motherhood, as a feminized domain, reproduces a dualism between motherhood and fatherhood, a less researched 'caring masculinity' (Ranson, 2011; see also Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Miller, 2011; Yoshida, 2012). Eräranta and Moisander (2011: 522–523) discuss the 'regimes of truth' about fatherhood and male parenting, arguing that much of the current discourse around fathering sustains representations of sexual difference that undermine women with respect to men. Even if in the UK, for example, men are offered two weeks of paid paternity leave, it comes as no surprise that their quick return to paid work forces mothers to become better 'experts' of childcare (Miller, 2011: 1107). However, as Heikkinen et al. (2014) point out, women can also be successful in combining family life and ambitious careers and, in fact, may gain significant spousal support

for their careers. As mothers and researchers, we attach ourselves to this viewpoint in this article – our partners have provided us with crucial support, both mental and practical, in order for us to fulfill our academic desires.

'That baby will cost you!' – becoming a mother in the 'new' academia⁴

Academic work and its unique characteristics have been widely discussed within our field (e.g. Bell and Sinclair, 2014; Clarke and Knights, 2015; Clarke et al., 2012; Dany et al., 2011; Dowd and Kaplan, 2005; Kallio et al., 2016; Loacker and Śliwa, 2016). For instance, academic work has been studied as an 'embodied practice, involving pleasure and love' (Bell and Sinclair, 2014: 268), entailing the 'voice' of both affective and intellectual labor (see Gregg, 2008). Clarke et al. (2012) notice that academics, in general, have been forced to stretch their professional identities to reach beyond the romanticized idea of loving their work towards the endless, loveless demands of meeting productivity norms.

Many universities have increasingly embraced the spirit of a 'managerial university' (e.g. Anderson, 2008; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Nikunen, 2014; Huzzard et al., 2017) in which private-sector practices are applied to public-sector institutions. These practices include, for example, an emphasis on the particularities of accountability, a shift towards market orientation and managerialism, increasing competition, and pressure to attain non-government funding, efficiency and economy (Anderson, 2008: 251). In the past few decades, Finnish universities have undergone many government-implemented changes, and embraced the idea of an 'entrepreneurial university' in which universities should be managed like enterprises and aim for economic independence (Nikunen, 2014: 122). At least at first glance, motherhood seems a poor fit for this context of endless expectations to perform.

Typically, women's professional identities (Trethewey, 1999) have been constrained and disciplined in academia (Fotaki, 2013). The development of Finnish universities as 'enterprises' (Lund, 2012) has made women working in academia more vulnerable in all respects (Nikunen, 2012: 716). In the Finnish context, women tend to have more teaching and administrative responsibilities (Lund, 2012: 218), which makes finding enough time to focus on research challenging. Whereas motherhood is stereotypically approached as a site of nurturing, suffering and sacrifice (van Amsterdam, 2015), academia is characterized by hegemonic masculinity (Fotaki, 2013; Raddon, 2002; Riad, 2007), intense competition and long working hours. To Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012: 7), it is widely accepted that 'women who are serious about their careers ought to forgo having children'. In a context of increased performance management (Kallio et al., 2016: 687), this oppressive assumption seems to suit well. Motherhood in the academy has been researched to some extent (e.g. Raddon, 2002; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2006), and academic careers are inevitably gendered (Hager, 2015; Johansson and Śliwa, 2013). Parenthood is commonly said to negatively affect women's, but not men's, academic careers (see Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012). In our view, the literature teased out above provides a thrilling avenue for further analysis of how particular embodied experiences produce struggles and negotiate the seemingly disembodied ideals of an 'elitist' knowledge-work setting.

Methodological choices

Context of the study

Several contextual factors influence how we negotiate motherhood across time and space. We can only speak about our embodied experiences as junior researchers working in two not-so-hierarchical business schools in Finland, a country with relatively high gender awareness and equality. Finland is often described as a highly-developed welfare state in which egalitarianism is seen as a deeply appreciated cultural value (Eräranta and Moisander, 2011: 523). For historical and cultural reasons and a striving for greater gender equality, women in Finland traditionally work (Biese, 2013; Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). This is possible and desirable in a country that provides excellent childcare and generous social security benefits for families. Paid maternity leave in Finland is currently three months for all mothers, and it is usually followed by paid six-month parental leave, ideally shared between both parents. Such leave is, of course, an enormous privilege compared to most other countries.

In addition, affordable high-quality universal daycare provides another important achievement in Finnish gender equality and work–life balance (Rolin and Vainio, 2011). Despite this option, Finnish mothers from different social backgrounds often stay at home for several years with their children (Biese, 2013). Thus, the intensive mothering ideology is strong in Finland, and the home-bound mother remains prevalent in Finnish society. Taken together, Finland's higher-education reforms and current social system make it an interesting context for reflecting on the relationship between motherhood and an academic career.

Methodological reflection

The methodological approach of this study is autoethnographic. For us, autoethnography was a reflexive practice, an approach in which two 'critical friends' worked and produced novel insights together (see Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 73). In autoethnography, the research subject explores specific phenomena based upon her own subjective experiences (Haynes, 2011). The strengths of autoethnography include capturing highly personal, emotional, and in-depth insights on a specific research topic that would otherwise remain hidden (Wall, 2006). However, this methodology inherently yields subjective findings, and potential role conflicts remain, as the researcher is both the producer of the research material and the one who analyzes and reflects upon it (Karra and Phillips, 2008). Also, autoethnography 'forces researchers to be vulnerable' (Porschitz and Siler, 2017: 569), and like Porschitz and Siler (2017) we struggled to put our private experiences 'out there' in the public realm.

After finishing our master's theses, we were both offered doctoral scholarships at our universities. Junior researchers in Finland tend to work on short-term contracts using external funding, and in this sense, they are used to university life colored by precarity (Hakala, 2009: 174). Rose worked on a doctoral scholarship from private foundations between 2014 and 2017. Anna was extremely lucky to be an employed doctoral student throughout her studies, and her position was, in this sense, more protected. Anna also

managed to get a permanent position as a university lecturer one year before completing her doctoral degree. This security had a significant, positive impact on her attitude toward combining family life with research ambitions. To us, completing a PhD largely felt like a stimulating period of 'becoming', and we both intentionally got pregnant in the most intense phase of writing up our doctoral theses. In fact, we hoped to turn motherhood into something of a personal strength for ourselves. As early-career academics, then, we had not distinguished clearly between home and work, as these spheres intensely intertwined. Thus, before giving birth we asked ourselves whether motherhood would make our already hybrid lives radically different.

The autoethnographic material used in this article was gathered in personal diaries during, before, and after the birth of our babies. We regularly wrote during our maternity leave with a view to using the material later for research. We mutually agreed to write down all kinds of thoughts, incidents, memories and sentiments related to motherhood and academic work, in the form of highly unorganized, freely written descriptions and fragmented 'snapshots' from our everyday lives. We wrote several times a week from early spring 2014 until June 2017 and produced altogether 50 typed pages of diary notes. Moreover, during and after our maternity leave, we met approximately once a month in our homes to discuss our diary notes and reflections, and where to take them further.

The analysis of our diary notes loosely followed the idea of a 'pair interview method' (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 61) – more precisely, the method of memory work (e.g. Fraser and Michell, 2015; Onyx and Small, 2001). The idea of memory work is to collectively analyze individually written memories of everyday experience (Onyx and Small, 2001: 773, 775). The move from individual diary notes to a shared story is complex and requires lots of explicit reflection. By applying memory work as a method, we realized that we were far from alone in our experiences, and hence also experienced 'spontaneous growth' during the writing of this article (see Fraser and Michell, 2015: 334). During a long, inspiring discussion on a shared conference journey to Uppsala, Sweden in July 2016, we identified the three tensions analyzed further in this article.

The analysis was an iterative process. Specifically, we combined our autoethnographic descriptions with theoretical insights to recognize meaningful interplays between these constructs. We thus moved continuously between our original diary notes, more abstract constructions produced during the analysis and the research literature, which provided conceptual anchorages for our ideas about early-career academic motherhood visible in our autoethnographic extracts. As close friends and co-workers, we supported each other in negotiating our multiple subjectivities and strived to create space for interpretation.

We acknowledge the gendered nature of all writing, and wish to challenge the 'taken-for-granted neutrality of the ways in which organization studies is written and theorized' (Phillips et al., 2014: 327). Given that we believe motherhood cannot be problematized from a purely symbolic, semiotic or materialistic point of view, the study of motherhood calls for an embodied and personal style of writing. By 'personal style', we refer to feminine and aesthetic styles of writing, which might help us to challenge the masculine stereotypes of academic writing in rational, disembodied, rigorous and rather distant ways (e.g. Biehl-Missal, 2014; Cixous, 1976; Pullen, 2018). At the same time, embodied writing renders us vulnerable – it 'violates the writer' in a patriarchal culture (Pullen, 2018: 124).

Because we are writing about a subject we have intense feelings about and are currently experiencing, we must clarify our own subject positions and avoid romanticizing motherhood. Furthermore, studying sensitive organizational topics is sometimes socially undesirable (King et al., 2012: 504), and motherhood, we believe, is an illustrative example of such a topic. Although we must be extremely careful not to generalize our subjectively felt experiences, we critically ask whether our experiences as working mothers in Finnish academia are so different from other privileged contexts.

Negotiating maternal tensions within the ‘new’ academia

Creating meaningful spaces of our own – negotiating the tension between the mobile researcher and the ‘immobile’ (m)other-at-home

In this section, we wish to highlight the complexity involved in negotiating maternal and professional tensions. We strive here to avoid describing the subjects of the academic and the mother as static. In academia, however, we view freedom as a crucial principle (Loacker and Šliwa, 2006). Arguably, fulfilling academic expectations requires a willingness to be mobile and regularly travel to conferences, workshops and seminars. Mobility seems imperative for gaining new insights, perspectives and networking opportunities – and, in a way, for ‘performing’ academic freedom outside typical workplaces and hours. As an academic, one is also expected to create various *performance* spaces and be publicly ‘seen’ and heard (e.g. Karran, 2009; Ylijoki, 2005). The importance of mobility seems to be intensified for early-career researchers. In contrast, motherhood is, perhaps stereotypically, frequently constructed as a domestic and less mobile experience that usually remains hidden, private and home-bound (Federici, 2012; Thompson and Walker, 1989; Yoshida, 2012). Although we work from the assumption that there are different ways of enacting motherhood, and that it is increasingly a collective practice taking place in various public spaces ‘outside the closet’, such as shopping centers, cafes and internet forums (e.g. Norwood and Turner, 2013; S  il  vaara, 2016), we recognize the norm that ‘good’ motherhood is articulated through intensive caring for others (De Benedictis and Orgad, 2017) in a perfectly organized home, with fewer possibilities for negotiating mobility on one’s own terms. How could we then as ‘isolated (m)others’ with caregiving duties develop as academics, network, and be the ‘free’ and mobile researchers we still wanted and were expected to be?

Academic mothers *have* to step aside or take some time out to have children (Raddon, 2002: 391), and motherhood arguably affects one’s ability to act and move across space as a professional laborer. Also, a mother’s lifeworld is commonly said to shrink once her baby is born (Davidson, 2001: 288). The following diary extract illustrates fears of immobility and isolation, as well as the researcher’s unease and abjection related to the maternal body she inhabits. The extract also renders visible the researcher’s emotional struggle to combine the maternal labor of caring – historically devalued, unrecognized and concealed (De Benedictis and Shani Orgad, 2017) – with high-status (and valued) professional ambitions for a rewarding career (McRobbie, 2015). Here, the link between motherhood and monstrous femininity (Shildrick, 2002) becomes apparent, as the maternal body is degraded and marked as threatening and undesired:

What I feared was the image of the isolated, 'saggy, baggy, and depressed' monstrous mother trapped at home, lacking sleep in greasy hair, dark bags under her eyes wearing a milk-stained t-shirt and jersey pants. Although I felt at times extremely tired and confused, I still did not want to become her. (Anna)

The failure to conduct research is a serious disadvantage, and the ideal academic performs like a productive, disembodied machine who publishes in A-journals (Lund, 2012, 2015). We were painfully aware about the anxious 'performative culture' (Clarke and Knights, 2015: 1883) of the 'new' academia that revolves around its explicit rule of 'publish or perish' (Dany et al., 2011: 974). While experiencing anxiety and insecurity about our situation as new mothers, we found it surprisingly difficult to critique these ideologies ourselves. Consequently, we strived to find ways to develop as researchers and feel included in the academic community. To us, this striving intensely relied upon shared parenting responsibilities with our supportive partners while still conforming to a competitive working culture (McRobbie, 2013). At the same time, shared parenthood rendered us privileged relative to others, such as single mothers, mothers in inflexible jobs, or mothers lacking the kind of support structures that we had. In this sense, our own acts reproduced particular kinds of gendered dynamics, as well as certain expectations about caring and careering in a neoliberal academic context (see also McRobbie, 2013, 2015):

I attended a methodology workshop abroad when my baby boy was 6 months old. He spent the days with his father, and on lunch and coffee breaks I rushed to breastfeed the baby. By doing so, I felt like a good and caring mother. On the other hand, because of this 'obligation' to breastfeed, I had to step out of the joy of networking with new people in the workshop. (Rose)

The above extract illustrates the negotiation of mobility with breastfeeding expectations, and how the performativity of 'good' motherhood and academic competence connect in complex ways. One way of navigating differing expectations related to mobility was to bring our families along to conferences. Again, not all academic mothers have this option. When we were working, our partners acted as primary caregivers, which was a given in our striving for equally shared parenthood. Also, we felt privileged to work in academia, where the boundaries between work and home often blur (see Lund, 2015). Above, the desire or *obligation* to breastfeed rather than give the baby formula in striving to perform as the 'perfect' mother (McRobbie, 2013) becomes evident. As a working mother, Rose also put her children's needs above her own by rushing to breastfeed at the expense of focusing on her own professional needs. As such, the extract indicates that it is still very difficult to break with normative ideals and seamlessly combine work and motherhood.

As breastfeeding mothers at work, we simultaneously had to 'navigate the separation of the traditionally feminine, private realm of reproduction and the traditionally masculine, public realm of production' (Turner and Norwood, 2014: 850). Combining extended breastfeeding with academic work in a country with generous parental leave allowed us to perform as 'good' mothers in a rather straightforward way (van Amsterdam, 2015: 283). At the same time, the breastfeeding recommendations that we strived to follow in a desire to reach 'perfection' (McRobbie, 2013, 2015) acted as mechanisms of control that

sometimes excluded us from our workplaces. Below, we show how Anna, in an attempt to embrace and practice shared parenthood, explicitly tried to break with the intensive mothering ideology (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1996), the expectation to exclusively breastfeed her baby and the norm of women taking greater responsibility for childcare (Ainsworth and Cutcher, 2008). By attending a conference without her baby, Anna simultaneously negotiated the roles of a selfish, 'bad' and failed maternal subjectivity as judged by others. In addition, we illustrate how the physicality of the leaky, unruly maternal body directly affects a researcher's willingness to be mobile, and constrains her possibilities to network and perform her desired professional embodiment at a conference:

In 3 weeks, I will attend a conference in the UK alone and be away from my 4-month-old baby for three nights. It feels both liberating and scary at the same time. Whereas I am quite confident that our son will be perfectly fine with his father, I wonder how I'll handle the separation myself. At least my unruly maternal body will constantly remind me of being absent from my baby: instead of rushing to breastfeed my son during conference breaks, I must rush to the bathroom to pump. (Anna)

We conclude the first part of our analysis by discussing the importance of maternal leave for negotiating meaningful spaces of our own, which again positions us as privileged mothers. Despite experiencing a range of anxieties related to academia and its 'machinery of publishing' (Tienari, 2012: 205), we both felt joy and relief to go on our long maternity leaves. Paradoxically, perhaps, motherhood provided us an escape from some of the neoliberal demands of the 'new' academia with its consuming and stressful agenda. With no lectures to prepare, no marking to do, and fewer emails to respond to, we could, especially for the four weeks of maternity leave before giving birth, focus more on the professional work we loved and cared about the most: doing research. In this sense, the subject position of motherhood momentarily put us in a place of epistemic privilege that created *distance* from the 'new' academia (see Lund, 2012, 2015; Tienari, 2012).

Matter 'over' mind – negotiating the tension between 'fleshy' motherhood and 'brainy' research

Approaching academic work as intellectual brainwork with 'creative impulses' (Knights and Clarke, 2014: 338) and motherhood as dirty, earthy care work is, of course, hugely simplistic and generalizing. Still, the ideal academic worker remains a dedicated and extremely productive (male) body, paradoxically disembodied and universal and thus radically different from the figure of the nurturing, caring, and leaky female mother (Acker, 1992; Gatrell, 2013; Raddon, 2002). Also, motherhood is often said to be detached from intelligence and creativity (Rotkirch, 2010; Rotkirch and Janhunen, 2010) – a simplistic assumption that merits further problematization. In the following section, we wish to deconstruct these stereotypes (e.g. King, 2008) in order to show how the spheres of academic work and motherhood inherently interact. We are aware our analysis might uphold dichotomies, as well as reproduce the stereotypes we wish to critique. The following extracts exemplify the ambiguity related to the neoliberal self-discipline of committing to 'intellectual' brainwork, which is not only

steeped in an ethos of privilege (McRobbie, 2013) but also risks neglecting the sentiments and uncertainty of new motherhood. The extracts also illustrate how we construct the combining of motherhood and work as our individual problem to solve and how, arguably, our ways of working conform to the expectations of a masculinist academic working culture (e.g. Tienari, 2012):

In September 2015, when I had 3 months of my maternity leave left, my supervisor asked about my plans to proceed with my work. I felt confused about all his questions. On the other hand, I had previously told him I was going to work as much as I could. Therefore, I could blame myself for all these expectations to proceed. (Rose)

In January 2015, I had a first Skype call with my supervisor after giving birth. He started by casually asking what I'd been up to lately, meaning work, not private life. I just felt like screaming, 'Look, I had a baby 3 months ago. What kind of progress did you expect?!' However, I stumbled with my words and muttered that I had not been writing as much as I planned beforehand. (Anna)

The extracts above illustrate the sentiments of being torn between different social expectations and the experiences of failure and stress when negotiating different demands (see also McRobbie, 2013). A power dimension is also evident here. The importance of proving that we did not want to be 'located primarily as corporeal beings' (Gatrell, 2013: 624) became evident as we reflected on our autoethnographic notes afterwards. We feared that as mothers in academia we were seen as traditionalists or unambitious, especially because motherhood still largely lacks social recognition (Federici, 2012). Feminist research emphasizes that women are scrutinized by others and that we are trained to care about what others think (see also Biese, 2013). Precisely as Pas et al. (2014: 177) notice, striving to be both an ideal worker, who sacrifices private life for work, and an ideal mother is frustrating and underpinned by the ideal of a 'superwoman' who has it all (Thompson and Walker, 1989).

Regardless, we never really experienced motherhood and professional work as mutually exclusive and never saw a reason to keep these spheres separate. To us, they interacted intensely at home, and we could, at times, feel utterly happy about the blending of these practices, as the following extract describes. We show how our own experiences are perhaps more nuanced and different from the common stereotype of a working mother (e.g. King, 2008), and again, we emphasize that we speak from a privileged and protected position. It is also important to point out that we liked this entwinement as long as we felt in control of it (McRobbie, 2013) and not when we felt explicit external pressure to perform: 'All the talk about pregnancy brain, 'weak' female embodiment or absentmindedness has actually begun to irritate me. My entire body is still engaged with work, and I mostly feel empowered by my intellectual endeavors' (Anna).

As hinted above, our experiences of combining motherhood with academic work are somewhat different to the common stereotype of academic motherhood as negative, oppressive, and exclusive (van Amsterdam, 2015; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012). In our mundane lives, the joys of our academic work spilled over into and energized

our maternal labor – and vice versa – and the overlapping of these two worlds provided possibilities for new ways of being mothers in academia (see Raddon, 2002). On the other hand, negotiating motherhood while conducting research simultaneously requires self-regulation and discipline. Again, the extract above illustrates an early-career researcher identifying with masculine values in order to gain access to the masculinist world of academia and conforming to a masculine working culture (e.g. Kallio et al., 2016; McRobbie, 2015). This takes the form of a carefully disguised competitive feminine self-regulation in neoliberal times, which McRobbie (2015) critiques. Hence, the power of masculinity that ‘underpins the paid maternity leave’ (Ainsworth and Cutcher, 2008: 376) maintains existing power relations and continues to discipline female performance (McRobbie, 2013). The extract above could also be interpreted as a denial of sensory-based cues that told the researcher to slow down for the sake of her bodily-driven motherhood.

In contrast to the interplay between being an academic and a mother that the extract above renders visible, motherhood is often portrayed through the experience of ‘mommy brain’, as well as extreme tiredness, fluids, exhaustion and bodily sickness (Badinter, 2010), in which there is absolutely no time (or energy) for work other than care work. Of course, we experienced days and weeks when writing was difficult or impossible. Before our babies were born we had heard so many stories of terrible nights and the constant lack of sleep that we almost took for granted the norm that babies keep their parents awake. Rather than reproducing such stereotypes and the ‘maternal bias’ (King, 2008: 1706) of life with newborns, for us motherhood was about living in the moment and being flexible in all kinds of situations. To us, the self-discipline of keeping up with our work was not only sacrificial. Rather, it gave us a high level of satisfaction, which our protected positions enabled. This was also evident when negotiating a new rhythm at home with a new family member, particularly after coming home from hospital:

When everything I knew had suddenly changed and my scars of birth were still sore and healing, it was comforting to have something ‘old’ to hold onto back home. Different to the unknowns of new maternity, a mix of intense happiness, joy, gratefulness, confusion, physical pain, animal hunger and thirst, tears, blood and sore breasts that initially hurt like hell, my thesis was a ‘safe’, less confusing project that I felt fairly in control of. (Anna)

Also, research periodically and uninvitedly overtook the mind of the academic mother, and sometimes the spheres of motherhood and academia seemed to contest with each other in distressing ways, forcing us to search for new sources of meaning for our ‘academic calling’ (Hakala, 2009: 185–186). Therefore, in a similar spirit to becoming new mothers, writing our theses entailed mixed, sensory waves of joy and pride, as well as anxiety, despair and insecurity. Hence, when balancing the imperfect and the ideal (Lund, 2012: 226), academia did not always feel like a dream job, as the following extract illustrates:

I remember when I once eagerly explained to my fiancée about a publication process while holding our baby in my arms. He reacted a bit irritated by saying, ‘Do you always have to talk about work?’ I remember feeling surprised (do I always talk about work?) and offended (doesn’t he care about things that matter to me?). (Rose)

The autoethnographic extract above also illustrates the tension between our passion for our academic work (e.g. Gregg, 2008) and our partners' occasional failure to understand our enthusiasm for it, as both our partners worked outside academia. It also captures the gendered dynamics that we continuously negotiated with our partners at home, and thereby illustrates how the interaction between the spheres of motherhood and academic work was complex in many ways.

Committing to motherhood and academic work simultaneously: '... but I can't be 'just' a mother!'

We close our analysis by illustrating our navigation between the two intertwined passions of our lives: motherhood and research. To us, both represent inherently meaningful, rich and demanding life spheres. If motherhood traditionally exposes links to loving, caring and protecting *others* (e.g. Yoshida, 2012), this simplistic construction risks denying our subjectivity and *jouissance* for research by reproducing 'the masculine order' (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015: 363). We believe in 'the productive and joyous possibilities of interaction' (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015: 361) between motherhood and academic work, where motherhood constitutes a strength rather than a burden. Also, despite increasing demands for productivity and accountability in Finnish academia (Kallio et al., 2016), we always felt strongly about this 'labour of love' (Clarke et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the unspoken demands of the 'new' academia, which silenced pregnancy and motherhood, affected us, too, and are rendered visible in the following autoethnographic note:

As silly it sounds afterwards, I felt afraid of sharing the big news [about becoming a mother] in academia even if one of my supervisors commented, 'You should be proud of yourself. You have worked so hard on your maternity leave!' But I enjoyed maternity as a deeply personal experience. (Rose)

The extract above also relates to the idea of the 'maternal body' being unwelcome in the masculine setting of academia (Fotaki, 2013; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2006) and to 'employers' discomfort around maternity' (Gatrell, 2013: 622). Even so, developing certain rhythms in everyday life with a baby at home allowed both for academic work and our maternal embodiment to exist in a (partly) mutual, flexible and empowering understanding, as described below. Interestingly, however, working when the baby slept conforms to traditional mothering ideals of always being available for the child and adjusting one's own needs accordingly:

Given that newborns tend to sleep a lot, I developed a habit of working when my son slept and I felt like it. I was not neglecting him, yet I could keep working. Could I not allow myself to rest and recover? While negotiating a myriad of emotions as a new mother, I still think that my very own project, my beloved research, gave my vulnerable and recovering body much-needed strength and confidence. (Anna)

Interestingly, Kristeva and Goldhammer (1985) suggest that the mother is denied all pleasure except that of sacrifice and pain because the mother's *jouissance* threatens the patriarchal order. The idea of mothering intensively is a gendered construct

and has facilitated the exertion of power over women (Biese, 2013). One way of performing the cultural expectations of the ‘good’ mother was by challenging the normative spaces of motherhood (compare Säilävaara, 2016) and creating paths to ‘new’ motherhood by keeping everyday life with the baby busy *outside* the home, as the following autoethnographic note reveals. At the same time, this performance could be seen as another way of ‘professionalizing’ motherhood in the context of a high-achieving culture (Kinser, 2010):

I do a lot of things with my baby; during the weekdays we go dancing, singing, and ‘color bathing’ with other babies, and swimming (and diving) every Saturday morning. Sometimes I feel I am ‘performing’ my motherhood as perfectly as I can by offering as many experiences to my baby as possible. I would feel guilty if I just stayed at home with him. (Rose)

As Raddon (2002: 387, 401) argues, there are possibilities for resistance and, ultimately, the ‘transformation of dominant discourse’ to create new ways of being mothers within academia – for example, resisting dominant discourses by taking our babies with us to informal meetings at the university. To us, this was an attempt to make motherhood a more visible part of our academic selves and our academic environments. This relates to Anderson’s (2009) idea of an ‘affective atmosphere’ in which the presence of motherhood is brought into the workplace along with empathetic and sensuous femininity (Lewis, 2014). Although this was possible in an enabling university in the Finnish context, it was not necessarily appreciated by everyone present:

I remember taking my baby to one informal research workshop in which I felt a totally different kind of atmosphere when my baby was present. Maybe this was only my feeling, but nevertheless, my son’s presence affected the ways in which other academics interacted in the classroom. (Rose)

In Rose’s interpretation, the baby made other researchers in the room behave in somewhat ‘softer’, that is, feminine, ways that contrasted with the hegemonic, masculine discourse of academia (Fotaki, 2013; Riad, 2007), and also made them laugh more, as they suddenly realized, ‘Oh, there is still a baby under the table asleep’. In this sense, Rose’s baby produced an oddly lighter atmosphere solely through his presence in the room. However, the experience could have been totally different with a screaming, distracting or ‘unruly’ baby. Because of the uncontrollability of infant behavior, it was still stressful to bring a baby to the workplace. Although a means of striving to revolt against masculinist values and produce greater gender equality in post-feminist ways (Nikunen, 2012: 713), bringing a baby to the workplace reflected that they were still considered ‘out of place’ in this academic context. However, in many other workplaces, a baby would never have been socially permitted, and workplace environments are not necessarily as family-friendly as Finnish academia appears to be.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of our article was to explore how we negotiate the ‘dual’ embodiment of our fleeting and vulnerable positions as junior academics and new mothers in the academic

workplace. Based on the analysis of our autoethnographic descriptions, we identified three interrelated tensions that allowed us to mutually embody motherhood and academic work. Our article extends existing discussions on the ‘new’ academia (e.g. Kallio et al., 2016; Nikunen, 2012, 2014), especially from an early-career perspective (e.g. Laudel and Gläser, 2008; Lund, 2012), by reflecting on its *embodied* nature in relation to the ambivalent experience of motherhood. The article illustrates our ongoing negotiation of striving to become both ‘good’ academics and ‘good’ mothers as a process loaded with gendered norms, beliefs and expectations. By attaching this discussion to matricentric feminism (e.g. Hollway, 2016; O’Reilly, 2016), which few studies have previously done, we seek to do justice to the complexity of lived embodied experiences. Addressing confusing, ever-changing and marginalized maternal experiences critiques the patriarchal order and allows silenced bodies to speak up, question and disrupt the longstanding dominance of disembodiment, linearity, purity and order (Höpfl, 2003) in our scholarly community.

Where existing literature on this topic (e.g. Armenti, 2004; Faulkner, 2012; Gatrell, 2013; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012) has – for good reason – largely focused on the problems, struggles and difficulties of combining (academic) careers with ‘good’ motherhood, these narratives risk reproducing certain stereotypes that repress more nuanced and diverse lived (maternal) experiences. In this article, we have tried to also include the more empowering and joyful sides of motherhood in the workplace, thus striving to deepen and develop the existing discussion. Involving a lot more than merely feelings of guilt, insufficiency and pain, motherhood includes a plethora of embodied experiences that might equally empower us, as well as give us long-term inspiration, joy and happiness as workers (see, for example, Gatrell, 2014; Riad, 2007). These positive sentiments and the *jouissance* of the mother (Kristeva and Goldhammer, 1985), we argue, deserve further and fuller scholarly attention.

This work adds to the literature on maternal body work as presented by Gatrell (2013, 2014) by critically discussing strategies to *resist* marginalization in academia. Whereas existing literature has largely focused on how mothers often fail to challenge oppressing mothering ideals, we discuss how normative and traditional mothering idea(l)s could, at times, be challenged. For example, practicing shared parenthood, receiving crucial support from partners, and explicitly making our maternal bodies and babies more visible in the university enabled us – at times – to connect motherhood with greater satisfaction in academia. Meanwhile, navigating motherhood in academia reveals culturally defined and ideologically underpinned expectations about the ‘ideal’ academic and the ‘ideal’ mother. The article shows how both ideals seem to emphasize full devotion, commitment, professionalization and high performance.

By showing how the ‘making’ of both a mother and an academic is, in a sense, a series of situated, repetitive and performative acts (Butler, 1990), we illustrate how gender performativity and the performativity of academic competence connect in complex, multiple and perhaps more blurred ways than the existing literature acknowledges. Specifically, this work problematizes further the artificial boundaries we often uphold between ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres (see also Porschitz and Siler, 2017) and practices of ‘private’ and ‘public’ mothering (Gatrell, 2013). Unlike most existing studies (e.g. Hebl et al., 2007; Hennekam, 2016; Little et al., 2015), we did

not limit our reflections about (academic) motherhood to the period of pregnancy but also considered our experiences of inhabiting maternal bodies and undergoing agency changes once our babies were born. By so doing, we reflected further on the day-to-day juggling of ‘messy’ motherhood and academic work across time and space, while trying to come to terms with our ‘fleeting, multiple and contradictory selves’ (Cheung, 2000: 45). Also, we strived to maintain awareness that ours is a *particular* kind of gendered process steeped in the social privilege of whiteness, heterosexuality and the middle class, and negotiated in the relatively egalitarian and family-friendly Finnish context.

This article makes a methodological contribution to the autoethnographic research approach (see, for example, Wall, 2006) by moving toward more embodied, vulnerable writing (Pullen, 2018; see also Porschitz and Siler, 2017) and by showing how the autoethnographic notes of several researchers can ‘talk together’. By applying the method of feminist memory work (e.g. Fraser and Michell, 2015), we aimed to show how autoethnographic descriptions work as powerful sources of research material to illustrate intimate topics that would otherwise remain silenced in the field of organization studies. Exposing our embodied selves has sometimes been difficult, but precisely as Porschitz and Siler (2017) emphasize, we believe in opening the door to more personal research on sensitive topics that would otherwise continue to be ignored in mainstream management literature.

Taken together, the above contributions are likely to be helpful to organizational researchers interested in the everyday, lived, embodied experiences of work and (working) life across and between the home and workplace. Exploring *how* ‘below the radar’ actions manifest at the level of the body is likely to be helpful to other ‘close readers’ of organizational action. Also, we hope that this article creates further space for thinking, writing, and reflecting upon the complexity of lived experiences. Finally, we are optimistic about moving in a direction that allows not only for our, but multiple other, silenced voices to speak up about nuanced lived experiences on our own terms, without constantly feeling pressure to sanitize or hide our leaky, material writing (Pullen, 2018).

Authors’ note

Both authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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Notes

- 1 Anna and Rose are pseudonyms. We both represent privileged embodied subjects as white, heterosexual, and middle-class Finnish citizens with pregnancies that happily ended with healthy babies. We are currently 33-year-old early-career researchers, partners and mothers. We are also close friends and co-authors, and we have both eagerly committed to trying to make family and work work. We both recently defended our doctoral theses – Anna in December 2016 and Rose in May 2017. Rose has a son, born in 2015, and is expecting a new baby boy in May 2018, and Anna has two sons, born in 2014 and 2017, respectively.
- 2 We approach career aspirations not in a traditionally individualist and masculinist way as the linear progressing to the top, but rather, as the desire and privilege to do intellectually stimulating work that could make a difference (see also Adamson, 2018).
- 3 Unlike the masculine body typically attached to ‘skilled body activity’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 851; see also Miller, 2011), the maternal body has been theorized as corporeal, discomfiting, leaky, and abject (Gatrell, 2013).
- 4 See Faulkner (2012).

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