EDITOR VIEWPOINT

Inhabiting and researching the spaces of higher education

Marie-Pierre Moreau*
University of Roehampton, United Kingdom

When I arrived in the UK 15 years ago, my research experience had thus far concentrated on the field of employment and social justice, which I had studied and researched in France, Ireland and Italy. Joining the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE) at London Metropolitan University (my first academic position in the UK) brought about all sorts of challenges. Not only had I moved to a new institution, I had also changed country and research field as my primary focus shifted from employment to education. My first appointment was as a Research Assistant to a well-known higher education researcher, Carole Leathwood (now Professor *emerita*), and I was primarily involved in the longitudinal study of a cohort of undergraduates who, at the time of my appointment, were about to graduate. So, ironically, students' point of departure from higher education became my point of entry into the field as a researcher.

Over the years, higher education and social justice remained a focal point of my research. The work with Carole Leathwood led to the collaborative writing of two articles, drawing on the longitudinal study I had been appointed to assist with. The first article, published in *Studies in Higher Education* under the title 'Balancing paid work and studies: Working (-class) students in higher education', considered the influence of social class on students' experiences of term-time work (see Moreau & Leathwood, 2006a). As a post-1992 institution,[1] London Metropolitan University hosted, and continues to host, a very diverse student population, including in social class and ethnic terms. Many of these students were the first in their family to attend university, although a significant proportion identified with being middle-class. This rich terrain enabled us to compare the pre- and post-graduation experiences of students from different class backgrounds. Incidentally, I had taken up this research position a few months before the publication of the 2003 White Paper (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) – a key piece of higher education policy which led to an increase in tuition fees. In the article, we argued that what was effectively a transfer of responsibility for funding HE study from the state to individuals reinforced and exacerbated class inequalities. In particular, we found that working-class students were more likely than their middle-class counterparts to undertake paid work during term-time, that they worked longer hours on average and that their work experiences were less likely to be related to their field of study. As a result, they experienced higher levels of struggle in terms of combining paid work with higher education and were more likely to find that term-time work impacted negatively on their attainment and well-being. These students also graduated from university with higher levels of debt compared with their middle-class

---

[1] Post-1992 universities are institutions which, in the UK, have gained university status that year. 'Non-traditional' students tend to concentrate in these universities.

*Email: Marie-Pierre.Moreau@roehampton.ac.uk

counterparts and were less likely to gain a 'graduate job' once they had completed, as we went on to find out. Indeed, building on these findings, we wrote a second article (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006b) titled 'Graduates' employment and the discourse of employability: A critical analysis', and published in the *Journal of Education and Work*. This article considered the same cohort post-graduation and offered a critical appraisal of the discourse of employability which was hugely popular in UK HE policy circles at the time. Our analyses challenged a view of the labour market as a level playing field in which graduates' skills, personal qualities, credentials and hard work are constructed as the key to success. We argued that access to a 'graduate job' was shaped by social class, in intersection with other equality matters such as gender, ethnicity, age and disability. Yet, as we found at the time, many students drew on a discourse of the labour market as meritocratic and interpreted their inability to gain a 'graduate job' in terms of individual failure.

IPSE, being self-funded and underpinned by a collective, supportive ethos, enabled me to work with a diverse group of colleagues and on a variety of projects across the education spectrum. To reconcile my new positioning in Education with my older one as a sociologist of employment and social justice, I quickly enrolled in a PhD programme and selected a topic at the intersection of these fields: a cross-national comparison of gender inequalities in the teaching profession in England and France. This was to be a jointly supervised PhD, conducted under the expert supervision of Nicky Le Feuvre (then based at the University of Toulouse, where I had my primary registration, now a Professor at the University of Lausanne) and of Merryn Hutchings and Lyn Thomas (both based at London Metropolitan University at the time and now both Professor *emerita*). The comparative dimension of the PhD represented a wonderful opportunity to understand and theorise the cultural differences I had come to experience on a personal and professional level as a French citizen who had migrated to the UK a few years earlier. This strand of my research led to a number of journal articles (see Moreau, 2014a, 2015) and three books: a monograph entitled *Les Enseignants et Le Genre* [Teachers and Gender], published by the Presses Universitaires de France in 2011; an edited volume entitled *Inequalities in the Teaching Profession*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014; and a monograph, *Teachers, Gender and the Feminisation Debate*, due for publication with Routledge in 2018.

While my work on school teachers may not seem directly related to higher education, both research areas have informed each other over the years in a range of ways. In particular, researching how secondary school teachers negotiate the demands of paid and care work has helped me to realise how care work is, to a great extent, invisibilised in academia. This realisation has also been compounded by my personal experience. As a researcher who was also a PhD student and a mother (it took me about five years to complete my PhD while working full-time, and my daughter was 22 months old when I finally passed my viva), I found that there was extensive literature informing the relationship between parenting and academic work, but very little on the relationship between the other two 'pillars' of my experience: being a parent and a (doctoral) student. The very idea of this research project emerged as I was dropping my daughter at the local university nursery, reflecting on how the nursery represented a child-friendly enclave in an otherwise adult-dominated environment – a striking example of how the relationship with my research topics has been shaped by my subjective positionality as a mother, a student and an academic (among other identity markers). Sadly, this nursery, like many other university nurseries, has since closed despite a campaign run by a group of local parents. In a move characteristic of the performative and 'careless' penchant of higher education institutions in neo-liberal times (Lynch, 2010), it has been replaced by a 'student lounge'.

In 2010, having completed my PhD and taken up a new position at another post-1992 institution,

the opportunity to finally research student parents arose in the form of a research funding programme led by the Nuffield Foundation on women's education and student parents. Building on the work I had conducted on 'non-traditional' students as well as my doctoral thesis, I was able to start researching a group who represents a significant presence in higher education, yet is acutely under-researched. Five years later, having joined the University of Roehampton as a Reader in Sociology of Education and later on as Director of the Research in Inequalities Societies and Education (RISE) research centre, I was able to expand my research on carers to academic staff thanks to a grant from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (Moreau & Robertson, 2017) and, more recently, from the Society for Research in Higher Education.

This stream of my work has led to a range of academic publications (e.g. Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Moreau, 2016) and is ongoing. Working on the relationship between academic and care work has taught me several things. It has enabled me to observe how, despite decades of equality legislation and widening participation initiatives, caregivers and care work are still subjected to processes of invisibilisation in academic cultures. While the parenting of healthy, abled children comes with many challenges, this appears to be the most visible and supported form of care work (Moreau & Robertson, 2017). 'Other' types of care work, such as parenting children with special needs or with a disability, caring for a relative or friend with an illness or for an elderly parent tend to be more invisibilised and associated with lower levels of institutional support. Ultimately, these carers are the ones more likely to avoid disclosure and seek individualised solutions, despite also being the ones going through the most challenging sets of circumstances, in what I have described as a 'hierarchy of care' (*ibid*.). Likewise, losing a loved one, infertility, miscarriages and still births are rarely narrated in academic contexts and generally unsupported despite the often huge physical, mental, emotional and sometimes financial toll they have on individuals (Weaver-Hightower, 2012).

The invisibility of care work and carers is nothing new. Indeed, it was already ingrained in the Cartesian ideals of the 17th century, although the association between academic excellence and the 'bachelor boy' (i.e. the care-free, white, middle- or upper-class male) goes back even longer (Edwards, 1993; Hinton-Smith, 2012). What is new, however, is that this invisibility has persisted despite the fact that, as noted above, carers now represent a significant presence in academia, both among staff and students. Moreover, under the influence of global neo-liberalism, the dissociation between care and academia plays out in new ways, as carelessness has become "deeply interwoven with the commerce of HE markets" (Lynch, 2010, p. 59). In the context of a culture of long hours, allied with the worldwide geographical mobility and short-time availability now expected of academics, performing an academic identity risks becoming out of reach for caregivers who face the demands of two 'greedy institutions' (Coser, 1974; Grummel, Devine, & Lynch, 2009). Students are not immune to that discourse as they are increasingly constructed as 'productive employees' (Macoun & Miller, 2014).

It is also worth noting here that the invisibility of care work does not just apply to those with responsibility for a 'dependant'. It also characterises most forms of caregiving, whether performed within or outside institutional settings. The work of Sandra Acker, for example, has highlighted how the care work provided by female academics inside and outside higher education attracts limited visibility and reward, with more recent research showing that not much has changed despite the prevalence of a discourse of 'feminisation' (Acker & Feuerverger, 2006; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Leathwood & Read, 2009; Macfarlane & Burg, 2015). I have myself hugely benefited, and continue to benefit, from the support of my peers, particularly from senior female colleagues giving away their precious time to provide (often unpaid) intellectual, emotional and practical care work. Yet this support is hardly ever acknowledged as academic

identities are prevailingly constructed through individualised discourses of merit and talent. I am also aware that this support has been facilitated by the gendered, classed and raced relations of power and by the privileges associated with being White and, by some definitions, middle-class.

As well as the invisibility of care in academia, my research in this area has taught me that, in instances where care work and carers are visible, visibility can bring misrecognition. I have found countless examples of how caregivers are constructed through gendered and classed deficit discourses as 'problem students' or 'problem academics' who 'lack commitment' or fail to 'take responsibility' for what is often constructed as merely a 'lifestyle choice'. This focus on the individual and their caring responsibilities as the source of the problem is unhelpful and fails to recognise that the challenges faced by students and academics who are caregivers are compounded by care-free academic cultures and policies designed with the needs of the 'bachelor boy' in mind (Edwards, 1993; Hinton-Smith, 2012). So as to shift away from individualised and deficit constructions of care/rs, I have proposed to use the concepts of 'care order', 'care regime' and 'care practice', drawing on and in articulation with the concepts of 'gender order', 'gender regime' and 'gender practice' (Connell, 1987; Matthews, 1984). This set of concepts reflects a multi-level understanding of the social world (Crompton, 1999) and shifts the focus away from the sole individual in placing the emphasis on how individuals negotiate the (often care-free, masculinist, racist, classist and heteronormative) norms which 'precede them' and constrain the discursive positions available to them (Hook, 2016).

Evidencing the experiences of those who inhabit the margins of academia or are excluded from its realm is an important political and scientific project. Crucially, the view from the margins also sheds light on the power relationships and norms which operate at the core of academia. Once incorporated in conceptual frameworks and empirical studies which, like higher education itself, have reflected for too long the views of the dominant and the powerful, marginalised perspectives can contribute to more subtle and comprehensive understandings of higher education. For these reasons, I am enthused to note that the relationship between higher education, care and other equity issues is becoming a road more travelled. Work on student parents, in particular, seems to have gained momentum, with for example the work of Tamsin Hinton-Smith and Rachel Brooks in the UK, and of Genine Hook in Australia (Brooks, 2015; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Hook, 2016). As one of the incoming editors of *International Studies in Widening Participation* (with Nadine Zacharias), I look forward to continuing to engage with research and policy agendas concerned with widening participation and social justice matters.

References

Acker, S., & Feuerverger, G. (2006). Doing Good and Feeling Bad: The work of women university teachers. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 26*(3), 401-422.

Acker, S., & Armenti, C. (2004). Sleepless in Academia. *Gender & Education, 16*(1), 3–24.

Brooks, R. (2015). Social and Spatial Disparities in Emotional Responses to Education: Feelings of 'guilt' amongst student-parents. *British Educational Research Journal, 41*(3), 505-519.

Connell, R.W. (1987). *Gender and Power*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Coser, L. (1974). *Greedy Institutions*. New York: Free Press.

Crompton, R. (Ed.). (1999). *Restructuring Gender Relations and Employment: The decline of the male breadwinner*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Department for Education and Skills. (2003). *The Future of Higher Education: What it means to students and parents*. Government White Paper. London: DfES.

Edwards, R. (1993). *Mature Women Students: Separating or connecting family and education*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Grummell, B., Devine, D., & Lynch, K. (2009). The Careless Manager: Gender, care and new managerialism in higher education. *Gender and Education, 21*(2), 191-208.

Hinton-Smith, T. (2012). *Lone Parents' Experiences as Higher Education Students*. Leicester, UK: NIACE.

Hook, G. (2016). *Sole Parent Students and Higher Education: Gender, policy and widening participation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Leathwood, C., & Read, B. (2009). *Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education: A feminised future?* Buckingham, UK: SRHE and Open University Press.

Lynch, K. (2010). Carelessness: A hidden doxa of higher education. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 9*(1), 54-67.

Macoun, A., & Miller, D. (2014). Surviving (Thriving) in Academia: Feminist support networks and women ECRs. *Journal of Gender Studies, 23*(3), 287-301

Macfarlane, B., & Burg, D. (2015). Women Professors as Intellectual Leaders. Paper presented at the SRHE conference, Newport, Wales, 7-9 December.

Matthews, J. (1984). *Good and Mad Women: The historical construction of femininity in twentieth-century Australia*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Moreau, M.P. (2018). *Teachers, Gender and the Feminisation Debate*. London: Routledge.

Moreau, M.P. (2016). Regulating the Student Body/ies: University policies and student parents. *British Educational Research Journal, 42*(5), 906-925.

Moreau, M.P. (2015). Becoming a Secondary School Teacher in England and France: Contextualising career 'choice'. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 45*(3), 401-421.

Moreau, M.P. (2014a). Usages et Conceptions des Organisations Syndicales chez les Enseignants du Second Degré: Une comparaison France-Angleterre [Uses and views of trade unions among secondary school teachers: A France-England comparison]. *Sociologie du Travail, 56*(4), 493-512.

Moreau, M.P. (Ed.). (2014b). *Inequalities in the Teaching Profession: A global perspective*. London & New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Moreau, M.P. (2011) *Les Enseignants et le Genre: Les inégalités hommes-femmes dans l'enseignement du second degré en France et en Angleterre* [Teachers and Gender: Inequalities between men and women in French and English secondary schools]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Moreau, M.P., & Kerner, C. (2015). Care in Academia: An exploration of student parents' experiences. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(2), 215-233.

Moreau, M.P., & Leathwood, C. (2006a). Balancing paid work and studies: Working (-class) students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 31*(1), 23-42.

Moreau, M.P., & Leathwood, C. (2006b). Graduates' employment and the discourse of employability: A critical analysis. *Journal of Education and Work, 19*(4), 305-324.

Moreau, M.P., & Robertson, M. (2017). *Carers and Careers: Career development and access to leadership positions among academic staff with caring responsibilities*. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Available online: https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/research-hub/small-development-projects/sdp2016/roehampton-po.cfm.

Weaver-Hightower, M. (2012). Waltzing Matilda: An autoethnography of a father's stillbirth. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 41*(4), 62-491.